Children First: Assessing the Role of Children in Active Mediation Interactions

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

The study of active mediation explores how parents talk to their children about television. This area of study frequently treats children as either a collection of demographic variables or a static receiver of both media and mediation. This study attempts to identify the various ways children participate in mediation conversations by surveying parents. Open ended questions about a child’s response to attempts at conversation were content analyzed to identify patterns of behaviors. Older children were found to initiate conversations about television more often than younger children. A broad typology of approaching, avoiding and ignoring behaviors is proposed and a number of more specific behaviors emerged. Suggestions for integrating the proposed typology into future research are discussed.
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Chapter 1: Literature Review

The effects of media content on children have long been a topic of interest to communication researchers and the public alike. The act of parental conversation about television content, or active mediation, has been proposed as a potential way to mitigate the antisocial consequences of televised content and even encourage pro-social outcomes. While a growing body of empirical research suggests that active mediation is a useful parenting tool (Nathanson, 2001a; Cantor & Wilson, 2003) there is a large gap in the extant literature; namely the involvement of children. Children’s role in active mediation research has frequently been reduced to individual difference variables, such as age and gender in parental surveys, or as a passive receiver of both media content and active mediation. Although developmental literature suggests that the way children understand and interact with television changes as they age (e.g., Cantor, Wilson & Hoffner, 1986) little to no active mediation research has looked at the child’s involvement in the mediation conversation itself. The goal of the current research project is to introduce the study of children as active participants in the mediation process by exploring their responses to mediation attempts by parents.

History and Theory

Active Mediation
Questions of how parents can enhance the positive effects or mitigate the negative effects of television content has given rise to the study of a technique known as active mediation. In the broadest possible definition, active mediation is an interaction with a child about television. It may be positive or negative, and it may take place before, during or after television viewing. Active mediation may be provided by either a parent or another co-viewer (Nathanson 2001a). Active mediation has gone by a number of different titles as different researchers from different fields approached the phenomena simultaneously. For the sake of clarity, in this paper all actions or operational definitions which fulfill Nathanson’s (2001a) definition will be referred to as active mediation, regardless of the title given to it in the original research.

Active mediation has been differentiated (conceptually and operationally) from two related behaviors; restrictive mediation and social co-viewing. Restrictive mediation refers to rulemaking and social co-viewing refers to watching television with a child but without attempting to modify any media effects (Valkenburg, Krcmar, Peeters, & Marseille 1999). Positive active mediation occurs when a co-viewer attempts to reinforce the messages being provided by television content which is often educational or prosocial in nature. Examples of research conducted on positive active mediation include studies attempting to reinforce educational lessons provided by programs such as *Sesame Street* (Saloman, 1977) and *the Electric Company* (Corder-Bolz, 1980).

Although positive active mediation has certainly received some research attention, the lion’s share of empirical research of active mediation has dealt with negative active mediation. Negative active mediation, which focuses on attempts to mitigate the effects
of media content on children, has been at the heart of active mediation research since the earliest studies of the technique. In one of the first empirical tests of active mediation, Hicks (1968) conducted a laboratory experiment which studied the ability of criticisms of televised portrayals to reduce imitative aggression in a child’s play shortly after viewing. Since then negative active mediation has been empirically tested in numerous settings, with various mediators and targeting multiple content areas. Some examples of the diversity of negative active mediation research include mediation being delivered by the investigator (Nathanson & Yang, 2003), teachers (Corder-Bolz, 1980) or mothers (Mattern & Lindholm, 2003) and may cover a range of content areas such as violence (Nathanson & Cantor, 2000), fright responses (Buijzen, Walma Van Der Molen, & Sondij, 2007) and acceptance of stereotyped sex roles (Corder-Bolz, 1980). Any content which an adult co-viewer might view as objectionable or potentially harmful could potentially be the focus of active mediation.

The study of active mediation has recently received two conceptual reviews which have attempted to provide a unifying force for the literature, provide an overview of empirical findings and describe a potential path forward for future research (Nathanson, 2001a; Cantor & Wilson, 2003) Both reviews provided numerous examples of empirical findings supporting the effectiveness of active mediation at reducing negative outcomes in children. Nathanson (2001a) in particular argues for conceptual clarity in the active mediation research by the standardization of the terms and definitions being used in future active mediation literature.

Children’s Involvement
Review of the active mediation literature provides clear indication of a gap in the current empirical methodology. Although extensive research has been performed on active mediation of children’s television content, the actual role of the child in the mediation conversation is very limited in the extant mediation literature. Surveys designed to predict active mediation are often parental in nature and include individual differences in child responses based on demographics (e.g., Bybee, Robinson & Turrow, 1982; Willsie, 2006). One such parental survey, performed by Warren (2003), assessed what predicted parental mediation. Children were represented in this study in questions to parents which asked for their child’s gender, age and how much television the child viewed on the average weekday and weekend day.

Parental surveys, which are usually designed to assess factors which predict active mediation, are unlikely to be focus on the child’s involvement in the process. Experimental designs which use children as participants are better suited to including the child’s role in the conversation. However, many of these experimental studies treat children as relatively static receivers of both content and mediation. A typical experimental study will include a televised stimulus and a co-viewer providing some commentary followed by some form of post-test to assess the potential outcomes of the media experience (e.g., Horton & Santagossi, 1978; Nathanson 2003). One such experimental design, reported by Nathanson and Cantor (2000) included questionnaires given to children before and after the media interaction. During the actual mediation event, during which a researcher provided a mediation message and then showed a 5 minute cartoon, children were encouraged not to talk during the session.
received both media and mediation in group settings with a median of 11 students viewing with 1 researcher. Such designs ignore the potential for the child to be an active participant in the mediation conversation. Also ignored is the potential for that active participation to potentially change the outcomes of the active mediation.

Although the methods of parental survey and experimental design have limited the role of children’s engagement in the mediation process, children in active mediation literature are not seen as completely passive recipients of either content or mediation. Nathanson (2001b) studied both parent and child perceptions of active mediation by means of survey data. This study found that children’s perception of parental engagement in active mediation, restrictive mediation and social co-viewing actually had an effect on the child’s perception of their parent’s approval for violent content. Children’s perception of restrictive mediation was positively related to the perception that the parent disapproved of violent television content. Conversely both active mediation and social co-viewing were positively related to perceptions that the parent approved of violent television content. This highlights the potential for a child’s perception of a mediation interaction to produce unintended consequences, such as increases perception of approval of violent content. Other studies have highlighted the potential for a child to initiate a mediation engagement (e.g., Reid & Frazer, 1980; Stoneman & Brody, 1982).

Developmental Theory

A large number of theories and approaches exist in the study of children’s physical, social and cognitive development. One such group of approaches is the information processing approach to development. This general approach developed focus
on how the mind breaks down, sorts and otherwise processes the information that is provided by the senses. Frequently these theories use the computer as a model for how the human mind processes information, and may develop complex models in the form of computer programs to understand those processes. Development, according to an information processing approach, is the creation of more efficient processing systems and strategies in order to make sense of the world (Munakata, 2006). Some areas of particular interest as they pertain to children’s interaction with television are the areas of memory, processing speed and attention.

In order to process information we need to be able to store incoming information. Theories of memory based on the store model of information processing highlight three distinct areas, the sensory register, short term memory, and long term memory. (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968). Of particular interest in the comprehension of television is the short term memory, also known as working memory. This memory is used to hold in mind one or more pieces of information that are actively being thought about or “worked on.”

Early theorists argued that the short term memory span for lists of information was limited to seven meaningful chunks of information (Miller, 1956). More recent research has proposed that even a memory span of seven meaningful pieces of information is likely the product of some memory aiding strategies and that a more likely limit to unaided working memory is four items (Halford, Maybery & Bain, 1988). Empirical evidence has been found that memory span increases with age. Cowen, Nugent, Elliott, Ponomarev & Saults (1999) found that at 2 ½ children could recall approximately two digits in order, 7 year olds could recall 5 or 6 digits and adults could
hold six or seven digits. The age trend of an extending memory span held true whether or not subjects were distracted by focusing on a visual task, suggesting that the increased score was not simply due to the use of more effective memory strategies by older subjects.

In order to comprehend televised content children and adults need to be able to hold multiple pieces of information in their working memory simultaneously. Collins, Wellman, Keniston & Westby (1978) propose that in order to understand implicit information, (important, story relevant information that is never shown on screen) one must hold multiple pieces of explicit information in memory from which to draw inferences. Therefore advances in memory span should contribute to children’s comprehension of television content by allowing for more relevant information to be processed at any given moment.

In addition to gains in memory span children also make increases in overall speed at which they process information as they grow older. Kail (1991) tested the processing speed by having children engage in a number of different tasks. Some tasks were cognitive in nature such as simple mental addition, and others were perceptual-motor in nature such as releasing a button as soon as a stimulus appeared on screen. Kail found a general trend of response times decreasing from age 7 to adolescence (approximately age 12-14) after which the response times remained fairly constant into adulthood. The fact that the time in which it took to respond cognitive tasks improved in a similar pattern to the improvement in perceptual-motor activities suggests that it is the brain's speed at
processing incoming information that has improved and not simply increased use of more efficient cognitive strategies.

Luna, Garver, Urban, Lazer & Sweeney (2004) found a similar pattern of improvements in processing speed using ocular motor tasks, where the participants response was measured by the time it took for their eye to move in response to a stimuli. Processing speed improved dramatically from age 8 to middle adolescence (approximately 15) when adult level speeds were attained. Increases in processing speed should impact comprehension of television by allowing children to more efficiently process the constant influx of information in a way that is meaningful and can be accessed later.

A third element of processing information is that of attention. In order to learn new information and begin to work with it in a meaningful way we must first attend to it. In order for attention to be useful a child must develop the ability to attend to a single object for a sustained period of time. Children show significant increase in focused attention during play sessions with toys between the ages of 10 months to 42 months (Ruff & Capozzoli, 2003).

Often it is not enough to imply attend to a target stimuli, one must also be able to selectively attend to important information while disregarding that which is irrelevant. This selective attention was tested by Tabibi & Pfeffer (2007) in the context of finding a safe road crossing situation. Children ages 6 – 11 were asked to respond to a computer generated traffic scene as safe to cross or unsafe. Some children were presented with auditory distracters and others auditory and visual distracters. Older children in the
distraction conditions were better able to correctly identify safe crossing situations than younger children in the same condition.

The ability to selectively attend to important stimuli may be particularly important in the context of television comprehension because irrelevant information may be provided by the environment in which television is being watched. Schmitt, Woolf & Anderson (2003) found that in a sample of 50 individuals, 46% of television viewing time was either shared with or in competition with another activity, such as social interaction, playing, eating or reading.

*Children and Television*

It is expected that gains in information processing capacities, such as memory span, processing speed and attention, will impact children’s ability to comprehend and process televised messages. As children age they should become better able to understand television and this increased ability to understand and interact with television is expected to play a role in how they engage in conversations about television. Therefore understanding how children process television content is an important consideration when developing measures of their involvement in mediation conversations. As children age and mature cognitively it is expected that they will become better able to recall and comprehend television content. Previous research has addressed the effect of child development on the understanding of two general types of comprehension; comprehension of story related content, and comprehension of formal features.

Gains in information processing skills appear to play an important role in children’s comprehension of television story. Empirical evidence has been found to
support the claim that as children age they become better able to understand story related content. For example, Meringoff (1980) found that age of children affected the recall of story relevant information presented by a televised version of a picture book or the book itself. Regardless of the media used, older children (mean age = 9.6) showed better recall of actions, dialogue and figurative language used in the story than did younger children (mean age = 7.6).

Similarly Collins, Wellman, Keniston & Westby (1978) tested children’s comprehension of central, peripheral and implicit content within a televised crime drama. Central content was defined as information essential to the plot that was portrayed within a single scene, peripheral content was information incidental to the plot, and implicit content was information that was relevant to the plot but needed to be inferred by the audience. Across all three types of information responses to a forced choice questionnaire showed that children in 2nd grade correctly recalled less information than children in 5th grade who themselves correctly recalled less information than 8th graders.

Comprehension of television content is not limited to fictitious narrative. Smith and Wilson (2002) found that older children are better able to recall important information about television news programs. In response to a structured interview with a researcher older children (grades 4 – 6) were more likely to accurately describe the purpose of news (to inform about things going on in the world) than were younger children (grades k – 3). Older children were also better able to correctly differentiate a picture of a newscaster from a picture of an actor.
The second frequently studied element of television comprehension is an understanding of the formal features used by content producers to convey meaning. These formal features can include zooms, cuts, the voice of a narrator, or complex features such as a flashback. Empirical research in this area has shown that a number of factors play a role in children’s ability to understand these features, age being one of the most common. Rice, Huston and Wright (1986) found that, in a sample ranging from 4 – 9 years old, older children (beyond 6 – 7 years old) were better able to understand that a replay is a television trick. Younger children were more likely to interpret a replay as a literal repetition of an action.

Beentjes, Koning and Huysmans (2001) tested three different types of formal features with a sample ranging in ages from 4 to 6 years. They found that older children (mean age 5.9 years) were more likely to understand a dream sequence than were younger children (mean age 4.4 years) and that both age groups understood the use of a cut rather than a dissolve to imply that dream sequence. With a more complex item Beentjes et al (2001) tested children’s ability to understand that a character was making a home video through cues such as dialogue, amateur filming style and a red “REC” in the corner of the screen. None of the younger children were able to understand that a home video was being recorded, while the majority of the older children were able to understand from the formal cues. In a second form of that same story which included scenes showing the character filming the home video the older group understood that a home video was being made earlier than the younger children. Finally a test of whether children understood the use of a split screen to show that characters were in two separate
locations was performed. Results showed that while more of the older children understood the feature the difference between groups was not significant, and that the majority of both the younger group (82%) and the older group (95%) understood this feature.

Another common formal feature is that of the flashback; where events are not shown in the correct temporal order. Calvert (1988), using a free recall task, found that older children (grades 4 and 5) were better able to understand the of a television program which used a flashback than were younger children (kindergarten – grade 1). Similarly Lowe and Durkin (1999) found that older children’s ability to temporally sequence the events from a 5 minute program increased significantly from grade 1 to grade 3. They also found that older children (grades 3 and 5) were better than younger children (grade 1) at sequencing events from a program that was not canonical due to either a flashback or a random ordering of scenes. Interestingly they did not find that the use of a flashback resulted in better temporal sequencing than did a jumbled order of scenes, suggesting that a flashback is still more confusing than a canonical scene ordering.

These empirical findings all point towards a general consensus that as children get older they become better able to understand television. They recall and comprehend plot related information better, and they show an increased understanding of television’s formal features. Two primary explanations exist for why these changes take place; cognitive development and experience with television.

The first explanation for why older children understand television better is that as children age they develop cognitive skills and strategies that allow them to better process
televisioned information. This explanation is consistent with developmental literature from the information processing approach, which holds that children improve in cognitive capacities (such as memory span (Cowen et al. 1999) and cognitive skills such as selective attention (Tabibi & Pfeffer, 2007). One cognitive skill that has been mentioned is the ability to chunk information into meaningful groups in order to more efficiently process that information. Kelly and Spear (1991) found that providing a brief synopsis of important information after a commercial break to second graders increased their performance on a recall of central content towards the level of fifth graders. They argued that this mimics the chunking ability of the older children.

Another cognitive skill that is commonly considered is that of perceptual independence, or being able to move beyond simple physical appearance when making judgments. In a study of children ages 3 – 10 years Hoffner and Cantor (1985) found evidence that younger children focused more on physical appearance when making judgments about a character. In their study, children watched a short, 3 ¾ minute program involving an old woman. Children received one of four different conditions varying the woman’s appearance (attractive vs. ugly) and behavior (kind vs. cruel). Children were then asked to rate how nice the woman was. The researchers found that for the youngest group (3 – 5 years) appearance accounted for more of the variance in kindness ratings than did behavior (appearance = 21%, behavior = 13%). For the two groups of older children behavior accounted for far more variance than did appearance (6 – 8 years: appearance = 11%, behavior = 56%; 9 – 10 years: appearance = 4%, behavior = 61%).
The research on fright responses to television content has supported the importance of perceptual dependence for younger children. Cantor and Nathanson (1996) found that younger children were more frightened of news coverage of natural disasters while older children were more frightened of coverage related to stranger violence. They argued that this is likely because natural disaster coverage is filled with threatening and scary images while coverage of stranger violence has a threat that is more abstract in nature and there are less threatening images. Similarly Smith & Moyer-Gusé (2006) found that parents of younger children (5 – 8 years) were more likely to report their children were frightened by news coverage of the Iraq war which contained visual images. Conversely parents of older children and adolescents (9 – 17 years) were more likely to report that their children were frightened by news coverage addressing the possibility of a draft, a far more abstract concern.

The second possible explanation for older children’s increased comprehension of television is an increased familiarity with the medium itself. This theory has received mixed support from the empirical literature. Ableman (1989) found that heavier viewers were better able to understand the formal features of zooms and cuts than were lighter viewers. However, Lowe and Durkin (1999) were unable to replicate these findings when studying children’s comprehension of flashbacks in television. Crawley et al. (2002) found that amongst 3 to 5 year old children, those with more experience watching Blue’s Clues showed better comprehension of a new episode of Blue’s Clues. However, the more experienced viewers did not show any improved comprehension when presented
with an episode of a different series, suggesting that at least for the very young familiarity with a specific series only improves comprehension of that series.

Cognitive development and familiarity are not necessarily mutually exclusive explanations for children’s increased comprehension of television. It is entirely possible that older children benefit both from an improved cognitive skill set and an increasing familiarity with television as a medium. Both explanations lead to the same conclusion, that older children will be better equipped to understand television than their younger counterparts.
Chapter 2: Hypotheses and Research Question

Although there has been little active mediation research which has dealt with children’s involvement in parent-child interaction a developmental approach allows for the prediction of directional hypotheses. Related literatures about children’s fright responses to media and parent-child purchase related interactions provide some insights. Both lines of research have found empirical support the developmental perspective that as children age they become more cognitively complex and better able to engage in rational thought processes (e.g., Cantor, 2002; Valkenburg & Cantor 2001). Feldman’s (2004) update to Piaget’s (1970) four stages of development argues that at the concrete stage of development (approximately 6 – 12 years old) is marked by an increase in logical reasoning and rational thought. Similarly information processing approaches to development have shown that as children age they develop better skills for attending to and retaining information (e.g. Tabibi & Pfeffer, 2007; Cowen et al. 1999)

Research of children’s comprehension of television stories has supported this developmental claim. Smith, Anderson and Fischer (1985), found that while both 3 and 5 year olds showed the ability to process formal features like zooms and cuts older children performed better in story reconstruction tasks. As children age they have also been shown to show more complex processing of story information. As mentioned earlier, Hoffner and Cantor (1985) found that older children were better able to make judgments based on
a characters behavior rather than her appearance, thereby showing a better understanding of the information presented in the story, and a decreased reliance on simple stereotyping. Also, as children age their ability to understand more complex story-telling techniques increases. As noted earlier, Lowe & Durkin (1999) found that children in 5th grade were significantly better and comprehending a flashback sequence than were 1st graders presented with the same task. They also found that older children were better at overall comprehension of story than were younger children.

As children develop cognitively and become better able to comprehend and understand the story being presented by television it is expected that they will make more comments and ask more questions that are related to that story content in mediation conversations. Conversely younger children are expected to make comments and ask questions that are more directly related to basic perceptions (such as labeling objects) but that show little relationship to the plot elements of the television program. Therefore the following hypothesis is proposed.

H1 Older children make more comments and ask more questions that are story related than will younger children.

If older children are making more story related comments and asking more questions, then it seems likely that they will also be initiating conversations about television more often. Research has shown that even pre-school children are capable of using television commercials as a way to initiate interactions for a number of different social goals (Reid & Frazer, 1980). Increases in vocabulary, understanding of story and formal features of television should lead to an increase in child initiated conversations,
because these children will be better equipped to benefit from such conversations. Research on fright responses to the film *The Day After* found that parents of older children reported that their children initiated conversations about the film more often than parents of younger children (Cantor, Wilson & Hoffner, 1986). As children age they become more cognitively and socially capable making them more likely to ask questions about television content and initiate a mediation conversation. Therefore the following hypothesis is proposed.

**H2** Older children will initiate conversations about television more often than younger children.

McGurck & Glachan (1988) found that children’s conversations with adults changed as they aged and their understanding of adulthood changed. Children moved from a focus on anecdotal and physical reasoning to social and psychological rationales for behaviors of adults. This may be because as children age they are better able to process information that does not require a physical referent. Similarly it is expected that as children’s understanding of television changes with age, so will those children’s responses to parent initiated conversations about television. Younger children who have trouble understanding television content may see parental mediation as a welcome interruption. Older children, who may be invested in following the story, may attempt to engage in selective attention because they see such an interruption as unwanted, and competing for their attention.

Although some hypotheses can be put forth based on past literature the primary purpose of the current study is exploratory in nature. Of particular interest are the specific
conversational styles and strategies that children employ when engaged in a conversation about television content. Are children seeking to avoid the conversation? If so do they attempt to silence their parents, or simply ignore them? Are children eagerly participating in the conversation and asking lots of questions? If so are these questions replacing attention to the media content itself? Because this research is exploratory in nature it is best to phrase it in the form of the following research question.

RQ1 What responses will children have to parental active mediation attempts?
Chapter 3: Method

Participants.

The parental survey was administered as part of a larger survey dealing with parental mediation of news content, and as a result was focused on parents of middle school aged children. This survey drew from parents of middle school aged children living in and around the Columbus, OH area. Parents were drawn from a number of camps and sports leagues from around the city of Columbus. Activities were selected to be geographically diverse in an attempt to gather parents of various income levels. Parents were approached at fall sports leagues run by the Columbus Department of Recreation and Parks. Sports leagues were chosen because they allowed for a targeting of the specific age group of interest. Parents were approached by the researcher at a sporting event, or camp pick up time, and provided with a copy of the questionnaire and a postage paid return envelope. All participants who returned a completed survey were entered into a raffle for a $100 gift card to a sporting goods store. Approximately 400 questionnaires were distributed.

A total of 132 responses were collected corresponding to a response rate of approximately 33%. This response rate was similar to that of other surveys with no follow up contact (e.g., Klaplowitz, Hadlock & Levine, 2004; Warren, 2003). Annual income of the respondents ranged from less than $20,000 a year to more than $90,000.
The median income of the responding households was $90,000 a year or more, with annual incomes of less than $90,000 making up approximately 32% of the sample. The racial breakdown of the sample was as follows: 89.4% white, 5.3% African American, 1.5% Asian, 1.5% Hispanic, 1.5% Other, and .8% Native American. Two respondents (1.5% of the total sample) declined to identify their race. The respondents ranged in age from 27 to 77 years old with the median age being 41 years old. The sample was predominantly (84.8%) female with 12.9% male respondents and 2.3% declined to provide their gender. The children these respondents described ranged in age from 2.5 – 11 years old with a median age of 7 years old. The children being described were 61% male.

 Procedures

 Participants were provided with the questions to the following questionnaire as a part of a larger survey about active mediation of news content for middle school children. In order to keep from artificially limiting the ages of the children that the parent’s responses describe before beginning this section of the survey, parents were asked to think about their youngest child (who is at least 2 years old) while answering these questions. This provided an age range from 2 years old to 12 years old.

 Child age. Participants were asked to consider their youngest child when answering this section of the questionnaire. Participants were asked to provide the age of their youngest child, in years, and only refer to their experiences with that child while completing that section of the questionnaire. For the purposes of this study, children younger than 7 were defined as younger and those 7 and above were referred to as older.
According to developmental literature children show dramatic improvement in selective attention (Tabibi & Pfeffer, 2007) and memory span (Kail, 1991) at approximately 7 years old.

*Open ended questions.* In order to answer RQ1 participants were asked a series of open ended, self report questions. The instructions for this section encouraged parents to “think about all television” in order to encourage respondents to not focus only on news related actions, which was the primary concern of the larger study. These open ended questions were designed to allow parents to freely report their mediation conversation experiences with as little leading information in the prompts as possible (especially in the first prompt) so as not to bias their initial responses. The broadest question was followed by more specific questions in order to trigger memories and encourage further response and elaboration. The questions were as follows:

1) “Think about your youngest child. When you talk to your child about television, how does he/she respond?”

2) “When you talk to your child about television what types of questions does your child ask?”

3) “When you talk to your child about television what topics does your child like to talk about?”

4) “If your child does not want to talk to you about television how does your child show his/her disinterest?”

All of these open ended questions were content analyzed by the researcher in order to identify patterns of strategies and behaviors. The responses were broken down
into individual behaviors. The individual behavior was used as the unit of analysis. In order to answer RQ1 the responses for questions 1 and 4 were coded for responses employed by the children. Questions 2 and 3 were designed to elicit very specific behavioral responses, (questions and comments respectively) and were coded as well.

To probe RQ1, an exhaustive typology was developed to organize the types of behaviors provided by the parents. Three general response categories were defined a priori and assessed: ‘approach’, in which the child actively participated in the conversation, ‘ignore’, in which the child did not engage in the conversation nor did the child attempt to avoid it, and ‘avoid’, in which the child actively attempted to terminate the conversation in some way. Using an inductive approach similar to that used by Moyer-Gusé and Smith (2007) a typology was developed to encompass all general and specific strategies utilized by children.

Questions 1 through 4 were coded for specific behaviors that relate to the conversation. Specific approach behaviors included ‘asks questions’, ‘makes observations’ and ‘turns towards the speaker’. Specific ‘ignore’ behaviors included ‘continues to watch show’ and ‘does nothing’. Specific avoid behaviors included ‘turns away from speaker,’ ‘covers ears,’ and ‘terminates conversation.’ Patterns of specific behaviors noticed by the primary researcher while coding were defined and included in the coding scheme.

In order to test H1 behaviors from questions 1 (…how does he/she respond?) 2 (…what types of questions does your child ask?) and 3 (…what topics does your child like to talk about?) were coded for story related comments and questions. Any question
or comment made by a child that has to do with character motivation (e.g., “They ran away because their mom was angry.”), cause and effect (“He hit that man, now he’s being punished.”), or plot (“The knight needs to save the princess.”) was coded as “story related.” Comments or questions that did not relate in any way to an underlying narrative were coded as non-story related. Examples of non-story related comments are naming characters (“That’s Steve.”), providing physical descriptions (“He is wearing a yellow coat.”) or simple repetition of words or phrases.

Closed ended questions. In order to test H2, about the number of times a child initiates a mediation conversation, responses to the following question was analyzed:

“Think about all television content. How often does your child initiate conversation about media content?” Responses to this question were on a five point scale where the points corresponded with: “Never,” “Rarely,” “Sometimes,” “Often,” “Very Often.”
Chapter 4: Results

In order to test the proposed hypotheses and research questions all of the responses to all four questions were broken up into individual behaviors. For the purposes of this study a behavior was defined as a specific physical or verbal action performed by the child. Using this definition a single response could include multiple behaviors. An example of this would be the following response to the question “when you talk to your youngest child about television, what does he/she do?”: Listens, asks questions, offers opinions and sometimes different perspectives. This response would be broken into four separate behaviors: 1) Listens, 2) asks questions, 3) offers opinions, 4) sometimes (offers) different perspectives. For the purposes of coding, separate questions (primarily in response to question 2) and topics (in response to question 3) were coded as separate behaviors. So the response “why does that happen or did they do that” would be coded as two separate behaviors: 1) why does that happen, 2) did they do that. Similarly the response “sports, weather and politics” would be coded as three separate behaviors: 1) sports, 2) weather, 3) politics. Responses from the 132 respondents were broken into 875 individual behaviors.

In order to test the reliability of the coding scheme used in this study a second coder, a MA student in the School of Communication, was provided with a written coding scheme. The coding scheme (Appendix A) was then discussed by the primary
researcher and the second coder and behaviors that were not part of the reliability assessment were used as examples. After this training the second coder was randomly assigned 20% of the behaviors (175 behaviors) to independently code.

The responses of both coders were then compared for percent agreement which is intuitive and easy to interpret, but does not account for chance agreements. They were also compared using Krippendorff’s alpha, which does account for chance agreement, as well as multiple coders and missing data (Krippendorff, 1980; 2004). Krippendorff’s alpha was calculated for each category using a macro for SPSS (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007) and using the reliability policies suggested by Krippendorff (2004) a score of $\alpha > .800$ was considered reliable, and a coding with a reliability between $\alpha = .667$ and $\alpha = .800$ was considered tentatively reliable.

An overall assessment of intercoder reliability found that for all variables and all behaviors the coders agreed on 97.3% ($\alpha = .850$) of their evaluations. Typically agreement on over 90% of cases is viewed as reliable (Hocking, Stacks & McDermott, 2003). Reliability assessments were also performed for each individual variable that was coded and will be reported along with the results of each specific variable.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that the questions and comments of older children would be more often story related than those of younger children. In order to test this responses to three questions (When you talk to your youngest child about television, what does he/she do? When you talk to your youngest child about television what types of question does your child ask? When you talk to your child about television what topics does your child like to talk about?) were broken into individual behaviors. This accounted for 714
of the 875 behaviors, or 81.6% of the total behaviors. Each of these behaviors was coded as (0) “not story related” or (1) “story related.” Many behaviors were too broad, or did not involve comments or questions; as a result these responses were excluded from this analysis. Behaviors excluded as being too broad include general topics of conversation (such as “cartoons”) or general behaviors (such as “he responds” or “she asks questions”). After excluding all behaviors coded as too broad a total of 259 individual behaviors were used in this analysis. Intercoder reliability for this variable was 81.1% agreement ($\alpha = .350$), suggesting that the coding of variable was not reliable. A Chi-square test these behaviors by the children’s age group (younger = < 7, older = 7 +) revealed that the number of story related comments did not differ by age, $\chi^2 (1, N = 259) = 0.467, p > .5$. For this reason hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that older children would initiate conversations about television more often than younger children. This was tested with a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) of responses to the question “How often does your child initiate conversation about media content?” Responses were coded on a 5 point consisting of (1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often, (5) Very often. An ANOVA of these responses revealed a significant effect, $F(1, 125) = 8.90, p < .01$, such that older children (7+) were reported to initiate conversation more often ($M = 2.90$) than younger children ($M = 2.43$). Thus hypothesis 2 was supported.

Research Question 1 asks how children respond to conversations about television. In order to explore this question, responses to all four open ended questions were broken into 875 individual behaviors. These behaviors were then coded to fall into one of three
overarching categories: approach behaviors, avoid behaviors and ignore behaviors (see Table 1 for descriptive information about these major categories). A category for “other” was included to describe any behavior which did not fall into one of the three major categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># of behaviors</th>
<th>% of total behaviors</th>
<th>Krippendorff’s Alpha (α)</th>
<th>% agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approach</td>
<td>643</td>
<td>73.5</td>
<td>.845</td>
<td>94.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>.863</td>
<td>97.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignore</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>.807</td>
<td>97.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>.390 *</td>
<td>93.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Category α score falls below what is considered tentatively reliable (α < .667)

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Scores for Approach/Avoid/Ignore Typology

Approach behaviors make up the majority of behaviors reported by parents. Of the 875 total behaviors coded, 643 (73.5%) were coded as being approach behaviors. Intercoder reliability for approach behaviors was 94.9% agreement (α = .845).

Exploration of the individual questions offers some insight into why this is the case. Questions 2 and 3, which probe what questions children ask and what topics do they talk about, were designed to illicit a response which describes a child actively engaging in conversation, by definition an approach behavior. It is not a surprise then that 94.1% of the responses to question 2 and 99.6% of responses to question 3 were coded as approach behaviors. Conversely question 4, which asked how children express disinterest,
produced the least approach behaviors and only 3.1% of responses were coded as approach.

Question 1 was the most open-ended of the four self-report responses and 75% of the behaviors coded from question 1 were approach behaviors. Approach behaviors could take on a number of different forms (see Table 2 for descriptive information about all approach behaviors), one common theme was the behavior of listening. Behaviors coded as listening accounted for 6.8% (44 behaviors) of total approach responses and intercoder reliability for this variable was 100% agreement ($\alpha = 1$). A number of parents reported that their children listened when they discussed television. For example, #129 reported that her 4 year old “Listens if it is interesting,” and #117 claimed his 10 year old “listens briefly.”

In addition to simply listening, a number of parents reported that their children actively engaged in conversation. This was the most common approach response accounting for 87.2% of approach behaviors (561 behaviors) with an intercoder reliability of 94.9% agreement ($\alpha = .879$). Since engaging in conversation simply requires that the child verbally take part in the conversation it includes almost all responses to questions 2 and 3 (questions children ask and topics they talk about). Some of these engaging behaviors were broad responses, such as respondent #69 who reported that her 6 year old “listens and comments” when they discuss television. Others were very detailed describing the types of conversations their children would have. Respondent #46 reported this about her 7 year old son:
“He generally asks a few additional questions for clarification of issues. He also tends to put himself in the position of the news character. If there is something negative he states ‘I would never do anything like that’”

And respondent #8 stated this about her 8 year old son:

“We have a back and forth conversation. I might ask him if he understands a situation shown on TV, etc. and he’ll respond to my question, sometimes with questions of his own.”

Approach behaviors such as asking questions and making comments were related to a large number of topics. Some common topics were sports (31 behaviors, 4.8% of approach, 98.9% agreement, $\alpha = .795$), cartoons (28 behaviors, 4.3% of approach, 98.3% agreement, $\alpha = .659$, just below the range considered tentatively reliable), weather (27 behaviors, 4.1% of approach, 100% agreement, $\alpha = 1$), news (15 behaviors, 2.3% of approach, 98.3% agreement, $\alpha = .761$) and politics (26 behaviors, 4% of approach, 100% agreement, $\alpha = 1$). (Note: this data was gathered within months of the 2008 Presidential election which might have made political discussions more common). Another response was that children would discuss commercials often expressing interest in the items being advertised (13 behaviors, 2% of approach, 99.4% agreement, $\alpha = .798$). Respondent #10 reported that her 4 year old “wants everything she sees on TV, we try to tell her about commercials.”

Children would also engage in discussions about story related content. In response to question 2 a number of parents reported that their children asked questions which were related to the narrative content. Some of these questions asked for clarification such as respondent #119 who reported her 10 year old son would ask “What happened?” and “Why did something happen?” and respondent #21 reported her 6 year old son would ask
for clarification about sports programs such as “what happened with a penalty call?”

Many story related questions deal with motivations, and often begin with the word

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of behaviors</th>
<th>% of total approach behaviors</th>
<th>Krippendorff’s Alpha (α)</th>
<th>% agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engage in conversation</td>
<td>561</td>
<td>87.2</td>
<td>.879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections to reality</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>.256 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rulemaking related</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>.640 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial related</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic: Sports</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>.795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic: Cartoons</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>.659 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic: Weather</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic: Politics</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic: News</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>.761</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Category α score falls below what is considered tentatively reliable (α < .667)

**Category percent agreement score falls below what is considered reliable (agreement < 90%)

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Scores for Specific Approach Behaviors
“why.” For example respondent #17 reported her 5 year old son would ask, “Why did he do that?, ‘Why did that happen?,’ ‘Why is he mad?’” and respondent #40 reported her 9 year old daughter would ask “a lot of why’s – why is she doing that?”

Story related discussions could also consist of children attempting to make real world connections with what they saw on the screen. Comments attempting to make connections between television and reality accounted for 20.3% of approach responses (131 behaviors) and attained an intercoder reliability of 84.6% agreement ($\alpha = .256$) suggesting that the coding of this variable was not reliable. Respondent #110 reported that her 6 year old daughter asked the following questions, “how did the little girl get hurt? Why was that bad man at the pool? So should I scream and run away? So should I look for a police officer?” Respondent #125 reported that her 11 year old son was interested in the economy and asked “What is ‘Wall Street?’ What is a crash? How does the stock market work? Can he invest?”

News stories could also be a source of concern for some children. Respondent #127 related this about her 10 year old son:

“My youngest son was particularly interested in a story a few years ago about a criminal that escaped jail and was on the loose locally. He was terrified that the person would get him somehow and he had trouble sleeping. Unfortunately this criminal was on the loose for about 8 months before they caught him and in that time my child had high anxiety daily.”

One particular area where real world concerns were expressed was in questions about the weather. Respondent #28 reported this about her 10 year old son “asks about the weather daily in order to feel assured that there is no danger” and respondent #108 reported that her 7 year old son “asks about the weather every night. He is scared of bad weather.”
Respondent #3 reported her 7 year old son asked questions about the weather and “plans his day or coming days.”

Some parents reported approach behaviors that were not related with television content but they were related to television rules. Such responses accounted for 5.9% of approach behaviors (38 behaviors) and had an intercoder reliability of 94.9% agreement ($\alpha = .640$) just below the range considered tentatively reliable. Respondent #20 reported that her 8 year old son “will ask if he can watch more and tell me he thinks TV is great and [it] won’t hurt him to watch more.” Questions about rules were not only about quantity but also about content restrictions, and could result in arguments as much as they resulted in compliance. In response to question 1 about how her child responded to discussions about television respondent #77 reported this about her 6 year old son:

“These discussions are usually about the amount of time watching TV (‘it’s time to turn off the TV and go take your shower’) or about the content, ([him] asking ‘why did you block that show?’ we have parental blocking options through our cable provider). Both of those conversations tend to make [him] upset or angry.”

The second major behavior type which was coded is that of avoidance behaviors (see Table 3 for descriptive information about all behaviors coded as avoid). Behaviors which were coded as avoid required an active attempt to terminate a conversation and accounted for 126 (14.4%) of the behaviors reported. The intercoder reliability of avoidance behaviors was 97.7% agreement ($\alpha = .863$). Not surprisingly most (115) avoidance behaviors were reported as responses to question 4 which asked how children expressed their disinterest in conversations. This accounts for 71.1% of the total behaviors for question 4. The other 11 avoidance behaviors were reported as responses to
Parents reported the use of a number of different strategies that their children employed in order to avoid conversations about television. Some parents reported that their children would employ very direct strategies, telling their parents that they did not

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th># of behaviors</th>
<th>% of total avoid behaviors</th>
<th>Krippendorff’s Alpha (α)</th>
<th>% agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>.906</td>
<td>99.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Confrontation</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>-.003 *</td>
<td>98.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change the subject</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>N/A ***</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requests</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>.665 *</td>
<td>99.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short responses</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave area</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.665 *</td>
<td>99.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of props</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>.665 *</td>
<td>99.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Category α score falls below what is considered tentatively reliable (α < .667)

*** Krippendorff’s α could not be calculated because there was no variation in the comparison sample.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Scores for Specific Avoid Behaviors
wish to discuss a certain topic. Direct confrontation behaviors accounted for 9.5% of avoid responses (12 behaviors) and had an intercoder reliability of 98.9% agreement ($\alpha = -0.003$) well below the range considered reliable. Respondent #25 offered examples of this approach when she reported that her 5 year old son would “say ‘Mom I don’t want to talk about that’ or ‘I’m done hearing about that’ and turn away – or say ‘Can we not talk about that anymore?’ ” Respondent #30 reported that her 4 year old daughter would ask her to “please stop talking,” and Respondent #103 claims that her 8 year old daughter would “state she does not want to talk about it.”

Another avoidance strategy employed by children was to change the subject of the conversation. Changing the subject accounted for 7.1% of avoidance responses (9 behaviors) and had an intercoder reliability of 100% agreement (no $\alpha$ could be calculated because no variation occurred in the samples that were compared). Respondent #117 reported that his 10 year old daughter “abruptly changes the subject.” Similarly respondent #77 noted that her 6 year old son would show disinterest by “bringing up a new topic of conversation (e.g. something that happened at recess that day).” Parents also noted that their children would denote disinterest verbally by offering what respondent #54 described as “short monosyllabic responses.” Such short one word responses accounted for 4.7% of avoidance behaviors (6 behaviors) and had an intercoder reliability of 100% agreement ($\alpha = 1$). Respondent #59 reported that her 9 year old son would offer “one word answers, or the infamous ‘huh’” and respondent #91 answered that his 10 year old son would respond “whatever.” Children may also use requests in order to terminate an unwanted conversation. Requests account for 6.3% of avoidance
responses (8 behaviors) and had an intercoder reliability 99.4% agreement ($\alpha = .665$, just below the range considered tentatively reliable). Respondent #85 reported that her 5 year old daughter would say “I am tired. Can I go to bed?” and respondent #67 claimed her 8 year old daughter would “ask to change the channel.”

Verbal avoidance accounted for 52% of the avoidance responses (66 behaviors) and had an intercoder reliability of 99.4% agreement ($\alpha = .906$). A number of the behaviors reported could be described as physical strategies. In these strategies children would express their disinterest by engaging in some activity unrelated to the mediation conversation. Physical avoidance strategies accounted for 42.8% of avoidance responses (54 behaviors) and had a reliability of 100% agreement ($\alpha = 1$). Like verbal avoidance strategies the physical strategies employed vary greatly. One of the simplest physical strategies employed was to simply break eye contact. Respondent #8 reported that her 8 year old son “looks away, starts watching TV intently” and respondent #34 offered that her 4 year old daughter would respond with a “loss of eye contact, moving around.” A more involved physical strategy that some children employed was to actually manipulate the content of the television in order to terminate the conversation. For example respondent #50 reported her 5 year old daughter “turns the channel,” and respondent #43 claimed that her 10 year old son “turns it off.”

Physical avoidance strategies could also become complex, involving props (13 behaviors, 10.3% of avoidance, 99.4% agreement, $\alpha = .665$) or actually removing themselves from the area where the television is situated (24 behaviors, 19% of avoidance, 99.4% agreement, $\alpha = .665$) both just below the range considered tentatively
reliable. Some parents responded that their child would begin to play with toys or another activity. For example respondent #76 reported her 5 year old son “usually moves to another activity (computer/game boy).” Other children will leave the room, like respondent #122 whose 8 year old son “will go outside or go to a different room to play.” Some children may actually engage other social actors in an attempt to end the interaction. Respondent #82 reported that her 6 year old daughter would “not sit attentively, go play with a toy, walk out of the room, play with her 2 year old sister.”

Finally verbal and physical avoidance strategies could be combined together. A number of parents reported that their child asked for permission to engage in a physical strategy. Respondent #48 offered an example of this when she reported her 9 year old daughter would ask “can we play a board game now?” and respondent #67 reported that her 8 year old daughter “will ask to change the channel.” A child may also combine a series of behaviors together in order to express their disinterest. Respondent #28 described her 10 year old son’s use of one such combination when she reported that he “will say ‘OK’ and look away and try to move on to do something else.”

The third major strategy in the proposed typology is that of ignoring the conversation (see Table 4 for descriptive information of all behaviors coded as ignore). Of all the behaviors coded, 64 (7.3%) were coded as ignoring strategies and these strategies had an intercoder reliability of 97.7% agreement ($\alpha = .807$). As expected most (39) ignoring behaviors were reported as a response to question 4 about how children show disinterest. Ignoring behaviors were reported in response question number 1 about
how children respond to conversation (15) as well as question 2 about what questions they ask (9) and question 3 about what topics they discuss (1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># of behaviors</th>
<th>% of total ignore behaviors</th>
<th>Krippendorff’s Alpha (α)</th>
<th>% agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Ignore”</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>.886</td>
<td>99.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Doesn’t interact”</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>.761</td>
<td>98.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Scores for Specific Ignore Behaviors

Often ignore behaviors were reported simply with a statement that the child ignored the parent. Such statements made up 35.9% of ignore behaviors (23 behaviors) and had an intercoder reliability 99.4% agreement (α = .886). Respondent #90 simply stated this about his 9 year old son, “he ignores me.” Some parents reported that their child “zones out” (respondent #38) or “tunes out” (respondent #125) and respondent #67 described this unresponsiveness in his 10 year old son by saying “television seems to be a hypnotic drug. He is very distracted by it.” Responses coded as ignoring behaviors were frequently descriptions of things that children were not doing. These statements accounted for 46.9% of ignore responses (30 behaviors) and had an intercoder reliability of 98.3% agreement (α = .761). For example respondent #57 reported that her 5 year old
daughter “just doesn’t listen or interact in conversation,” and respondent #5 claims her 9
year old son “just doesn’t answer.”

In order to make this typology exhaustive all behaviors must be able to fit in one
of the categories. For this reason a fourth category was created for those behaviors that
could not be described as approaching, avoiding or ignoring. This other category is made
up of 42 behaviors, accounts for 4.8% of the total responses and has an intercoder
reliability of 93.7% agreement ($\alpha = .390$) well below the range considered tentatively
reliable. Most of the responses that fit into this category described children’s preferences
(e.g. respondent #65, “he mostly wants to watch kids shows, cartoons and superhero
movies”) or viewing habits (e.g. respondent #114, “she usually watches less than 5 hours
a week.”) While these responses were technically behaviors they were not responses to
mediation conversation.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The current study had two primary goals. The first goal was to assess whether there were developmental differences in how children responded to conversations about television. This goal was addressed through the two hypotheses that were tested. The second, more exploratory, goal was to develop a simple typology of children’s responses and to describe a number of different responses children have employed. The studies sole research question was used to accomplish this second goal.

No support was found for hypothesis 1 which predicted that older children would be more likely to engage in story related comments and questions than would younger children. The lack of statistical support may be in part due to poor survey design. The questions asked in the current study were very broad and as a result failed to elicit specific responses. Of the 713 total behaviors coded as responses to questions 1, 2 and 3, 454 (63.7%) were coded as being too broad to labeled as either story related or not story related. Future exploration of this question would benefit from more direct questions about specific mediation interactions or direct behavioral observation. Also the variable assessing whether or not a comment was story related had the lowest percent agreement score with 81.1% agreement and a Krippendorff’s alpha well below that considered reliable ($\alpha = .350$).
Future research would benefit from a more reliable definition of story related content, this could be achieved by creating more specific definitions of story related content. For example separating comments which deal with motivations and those that deal with character moods into their own separate categories may help coders to distinguish story related content from non story related content. Also utilizing the Collins, et al. (1978) methodology of describing story related content as central to the plot, peripheral to the plot, or implicit information that must be inferred, may be informative. Finally asking questions which are more pointed and directly related to story content may reduce the amount of responses that are considered “too broad” to code.

Support was found for hypothesis 2 which predicted that older children would be more likely to initiate conversation than would younger children. This is consistent with fear response research which found that older children were more likely to initiate conversations about scary material (Cantor, Wilson & Hoffner, 1986). The current study does not allow for causal claims can be made as to the underlying process responsible for this finding. It is in keeping with the developmental argument, that as children develop cognitive skills such as working memory (Cowen, et al. 1999) and processing speed (Kail, 1991) they are more likely to apply those skills to the context of television. One possible implication of this finding is that older children may have a very different experience with active mediation conversations because they are actively seeking them out. Parents and other adults engaged in active mediation may need to adjust the conversational strategies that they employ in order to be more effective.
The current survey design did not allow for the exploration of possible covariates that might account for some of the variation in how often children initiated television conversations. For example, the average amount of television viewed is likely to increase as children age. Considering this, it is possible that older children are more likely to begin conversations about television because they are watching more television. Similarly, the type of content being watched might have an effect on whether or not children initiate conversations. More complex programming, such as dramas and comedies targeted at adults and teenagers, may lead to children asking more questions. Future research should explore the relationship between age and conversation initiation in conjunction with these and a number of other possible covariates.

Research Question 1 asked how children would respond to conversations about television and exploration of the parental responses yielded a broad typology to describe children’s behaviors in active mediation situations. The broad typology consists of approaching behaviors, avoiding behaviors, and ignoring behaviors, as well as a category for other responses. Approaching behaviors are frequently verbal, in the form of comments and questions, and they involve the child becoming an active participant in the mediation conversation. Avoiding behaviors can be either physical or verbal and almost always involve some attempt to terminate the mediation conversation. Ignoring behaviors are often described by a lack of activity both physically and verbally. These behaviors, which may sometimes be referred to as ‘zoning out’ or ‘tuning out,’ involve a child who does not engage in the conversation at all, but who also does not attempt to actively end the conversation.
No conclusions can be drawn as to which of these behavioral types are most common. The design of the current study is likely responsible for the relative prominence of approach behaviors, since three of the four open ended questions were likely to produce approach responses while only two of the four were likely to produce either avoid or ignore responses. Although no conclusions can be drawn about the a priori typology proposed exploring the descriptive variables within each broad category is informative. Engaging directly in conversations is by far the most common approach behavior (87.2% of approach) which is not surprising because it is very broad and is not mutually exclusive from any of the other approach behaviors with the exception of listening behaviors (6.8% of approach). Since topics and questions listed as responses to questions 2 and 3 would be coded as engaging behaviors the reporting of engage behaviors is likely artificially inflated by the survey design. Similarly the number of times children engage in comments relating to the reality of television (20.3%) is likely inflated by the listing of topics such as news and weather which were coded as examples of conversation related to reality due to the subject matter. Despite these artifacts of the survey design it is clear that children engage in conversations about a wide range of topics, including different types of programming (news, weather, cartoons and sports), commercials, and even discussion about the rules surrounding television.

Exploration of the variables which describe avoidance behaviors show that both physical (42.8% of avoid) and verbal (52% of avoid) strategies are employed in order to terminate mediation conversations. Directly confronting an adult (9.5% of avoid) appears to be the most common verbal avoidance behavior and the relative rarity of this and other
verbal behaviors, changing the subject (7.1% of avoid) making requests (6.3% of avoid) and short responses of one word or less (4.7% of avoid), suggests that there are verbal avoidance styles unaccounted for by the current coding scheme. Specific physical avoidance strategies of leaving the area (24% of avoid) and using props such as toys (10.3% of avoidance) also leave room for the exploration of further physical avoidance strategies. Finally the specific ignore behaviors of direct statements that the child ignores the parent (35.9% of ignore) and statements that the child doesn’t respond to conversation (46.9% of ignore) suggests that this third part of the broad typology is the least developed and warrants further exploration.

Artifacts of the study design limit the ability to draw a conclusion about which behaviors are the most common in the sample population but that was not the goal of the current study. By identifying a number of different types of behaviors that children utilize in response to parental conversations about television this study supports the conclusion that children are active social beings with an array of tools at their disposal. A child may engage in conversations about a diverse set of topics, or she may use some physical or verbal strategy to terminate a conversation she doesn’t like. A child may attempt to make the television content personally relevant or he may ignore his parent’s attempts to strike up a conversation.

This may be useful for as a launching point for future research which seeks to further explore the engagement patterns of children in active mediation conversations. It may also be useful for researchers attempting to discern the role that children’s engagement in a mediation conversation plays in the effectiveness of that conversation.
Finally research into a child’s role in a mediation conversation may be used to develop measures of that involvement. Such measures could be applied to future mediation research, both survey-based and experimental, in order to provide a more complete understanding of the effect of active mediation.

Limitations

All scientific studies contain some limitations and the current study is no different. A relatively small non-random sample, made up primarily of female respondents calls into question generalizability beyond the communities it was conducted in. Moreover the relatively homogeneous nature of the current sample may artificially limit the range of behaviors reported by parents. For example the current study contained little variation in annual household income. Research suggests that families with differing social economic status (SES) have different beliefs and goals about parenting (Hoff, Laursen & Tardif, 2002). Parents with lower SES (as operationalized by highest level of education reached) have been found to be more likely to have a more authoritarian parenting style while higher SES was positively correlated with a more authoritative parenting style (Glasgow, Dornbusch, Troyer, Steinberg & Ritter, 1997). If an underrepresentation of lower SES parents leads to an underrepresentation of parents utilizing an authoritarian parenting style, which focuses on parental control rather than a child’s understanding of the rules (Damon, 1995), then it is likely that specific child behaviors which are developed by constant interaction with such a parenting style will be underrepresented or even unreported altogether. To this end attempts were made to obtain
responses from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds, but future study with random sampling from a broader population would be valuable.

A second limitation of the current study is that the cross-sectional design of the study makes any causal inferences impossible. This concern is only relevant to the finding that increased age was significantly related with increased initiation of television related conversation. Future research pertaining to this relationship should employ a design which allows for causal inference as well as allowing for the study of possible co-variants which may contribute to the relationship between age and conversation initiation.

The design of questionnaire itself introduces another set of limitations for the current study. Since the questions in the current survey were administered as the last two pages of a 13 page survey, fatigue may have kept parents from responding fully and completely. Also the first 11 pages of the questionnaire dealt specifically with active mediation of television news coverage, a fact which likely colored the responses. Finally as noted earlier the questions in the current study were broad questions. Broad questions elicit broad answers, which is in part responsible for the broad nature of the resulting typology. More specific questions may provide the opportunity for a more fully developed and sophisticated typology.

The reliability of a number of the variables can also be brought into question. Although the broad typology of approach (94.9% agreement, $\alpha = .845$), avoid (97.7% agreement, $\alpha = .863$) and ignore (97.7% agreement, $\alpha = .807$) behaviors were all considered to be reliable some of the more specific variables used to describe these broader categories were not considered reliable according to Krippendorff’s alpha or
percent agreement. These categories may benefit improved training in future research including multiple training sessions with practice coding sessions followed by discussion in order to resolve any disagreements.

Intercoder reliability could also be improved by clarifying definitions used in the coding scheme. The following approach categories did not achieve satisfactory intercoder reliability for either percent agreement or Krippendorff’s alpha: Connection with real life, rulemaking conversation and the topic of cartoons. A connection with reality was defined as “the child makes a connection between television and real life, this can be talking about the weather tomorrow or discussing something learned in class.” This could be improved by including that the connection may include an attempt to make the television content relevant to their life (such as “If I played that prank on my friend they would get mad at me”) or applying information they know to the television (such as “We learned in history that the Egyptian’s buried kings in the pyramids”). It may also be improved by clarifying that this behavior may be a question or a comment and providing examples of questions types such as “if _____ really happened?”, ‘if I can do ______?”

Conversations about rulemaking were defined as “The child engages in a conversation about television rules.” This definition could be improved by including the clarification that this may be a question (such as “why can’t I watch more than an hour a day?”) or a comment (such as “I think I should be allowed to watch the Simpsons”). It could also be clarified by noting that such comments could either agree or disagree with rules, and that rules may concern content, or time restrictions. The final approach behavior which was not sufficiently reliable was the topic of cartoons, which could be
improved by including the clarification that any comment referring to a cartoon character is counted as being about the topic of cartoons.

Several specific avoidance behaviors also failed to attain a sufficient intercoder reliability score. The verbal behavior of direct confrontation was defined as “The child verbally claims they do not want to discuss a topic.” This definition could be improved making it clear that a direct confrontation must be a statement or command and may not be a question or a request. It should also be noted that it is distinct from an attempt to change the topic. Requests were defined as, “the child makes a verbal request to engage in something other than the topic at hand, this could be a request to change the topic or a request to engage in another behavior.” This definition could be improved by providing a clarification that a child may request to engage in a behavior or ask that the parent engage in some sort of behavior.

The physical avoidance behavior of leaving the room was defined as, “the child leaves the room.” This definition could be improved by including the clarification that requests to leave the room do not count for this specific behavior because it is a verbal behavior and not a physical one. Only an explicit statement that the child exits the room counts for this behavior. Finally the behavior of using a prop was defined as, “the child uses a toy or computer or another physical object to end the conversation.” This definition could be improved by including the clarification that other humans do not count as props, while inanimate objects and pets can be considered props. Another distinct behavior should be included that describes actions in which children engage in social behaviors with other people in order to end a conversation.
Several specific categories were found to be reliable according to percent agreement but did not achieve alpha scores high enough to be considered reliable. An example of this is the direct confrontation example of avoidance behaviors which obtained 98.9% agreement but an \( \alpha = -0.003 \). This is possibly due to the fact that there was very little variability in the comparison sample; so few people reported this behavior that even one or two disagreements resulted in a very low Krippendorff’s alpha. Future research can address this issue by tapping into a larger, more diverse sample and including more directed questions in order to increase the variability within each category.

The final and perhaps most important limitation is that the current study was designed to assess the involvement of children in active mediation and did so through parental self report. Parental self reports tend to teach you more about the parent than they do about the child. Parents may provide answers which reflect what they believe, for example respondent #114 provided the following response to question 1 about how her child responds to conversations about television:

“I tell her that we don’t watch very much TV because the content in the vast majority is inappropriate and frankly there are better things to do. She understands and doesn’t question. She doesn’t like to be in front of the TV very much. She usually watches less than 5 hours a week.”

Similarly parents are likely to give answers they see as socially desirable and in so doing obscure the actual behaviors of their children.

Future research in this area should address this last limitation by engaging children as research subjects. Interviews with children and direct observation of parent-child interaction will provide a much more complete understanding of how children act in
mediation conversations. That understanding will allow for the development of more specific and sophisticated measures of child involvement and those measures will allow for a more complete understanding of the active mediation process as a whole.

Path Forward

Despite the limitations of the current study the results do provide evidence that supports the importance of the current media effects research being performed in a number of content areas. In response to very broad, open ended questions a number of parents have spontaneously provided examples of children responding with fear to news programs and weather reports. These responses are consistent with research that suggests that children have fear responses to news content (e.g., Smith & Wilson, 2002, Smith, & Moyer-Gusé, 2006). Also the finding that older children are more likely to initiate conversations about television is consistent with the finding of Cantor, Wilson & Hoffner (1986) that older children were more likely to initiate a conversation with their parents about a disturbing movie. This can be seen as evidence that research on fear responses that children have to television is truly relevant, and the study of children’s fear responses are important lines of scientific inquiry. Continued study of methods for reducing such fear responses such as parental mediation (Buijzen, Van Der Molen & Sondij, 2007) is also encouraged by these findings.

The current study also provides evidence that two separate mediation techniques are currently being employed by parents. Children’s discussion of content can be seen as evidence that active mediation is being applied and that children are responding to it. Similarly child responses which discuss rulemaking behavior are evidence that restrictive
mediation is also being engaged in by parents. These are two of the mediation styles
described by Valkenburg et. al, (1999). It is difficult to assess the presence of the third
mediation style of “social co-viewing” since it is based on an absence of directed
conversation and the current study is geared towards active responses to conversation
about television.

A number of parents reported their child asking questions about the reality of
television content. This supports the importance of continued research into the
psychological and developmental underpinnings of children’s understanding to
television’s reality (e.g., Wright, Huston, Reitz, Leary, & Suwatchara, 1994; Shapiro &
Chock, 2003). That children are asking questions about the reality of televised content is
consistent with the evidence that children are able to recognize the factual reality of some
television. Wright et al., (1994) provided an example of this when they found that
children were able to distinguish factual content (e.g., news) from fictional content.
Children as young as two can be have the ability to use realisticalistic televisied content
to improve performance on an item retrieval task (Schmidt, Crawley-Davis & Anderson,
2007) and can be trained to use that content more effectively (Troseth, 2003). This
suggests that even very young children are capable of grasping the reality of television
content. The evidence of children’s concern about televisions relationship with reality
also suggests that future research into parent-child conversations about the reality of
television content could be fruitful.

Finally parent’s responses regarding children’s questions about advertised
products provides an argument for the continued research of children’s understanding of
advertisement such as that performed by Oates, Blades, & Gunter (2006) which suggests that children can remember advertisement content but are poor judges of persuasive intent. The finding of parental concern about advertisements also confirms the importance of research into potential parental responses to advertising (e.g., Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2005). At the very least we know that these are concepts that some parents in this sample have taken note of.

Perhaps the one thing that the current study most clearly shows is that children are capable of a broad range of responses to parental attempts to engage in a conversation about television. This knowledge, and a very simple typology of approach, avoid and ignore behaviors provides a step towards integrating those responses into future research methodology. Experimental designs developed to assess the effectiveness of a mediation strategy could incorporate an assessment of the subject’s response within the approach/avoid/ignore typology. That response could then be explored as a possible mediator of the active mediation and its intended effect. Similarly surveys of parents might include their child’s typical response type as an individual difference variable which can be explored or controlled for.

Further research, including behavioral observation and child interviews, should provide much more sophisticated measures and typologies than the one presented here. More clearly defined categories of behavior should provide more reliable variables as well as a more comprehensive understanding of what exactly each of the three major responses (approach, avoid and ignore) encompasses. More importantly involving children directly in the research process will allow researchers access to behaviors that
parents have forgotten to include or have willfully omitted in their own responses. For example a father may not write that his son screams every time the channel is changed but such an example would be impossible to hide from a researcher directly observing the interaction.

Behaviors that were not included in the current study may present themselves and those which may have seemed insignificant in parental reports may turn out to be very important to the children who engage in them. Take ignoring tactics as an example, the current study only describes two types of behaviors as described by parents (actively ignoring, and an absence of engagement). Engaging children directly in the research might reveal that there are a number of diverse and subtle tactics that can be employed to ignore an adult’s unwanted conversational advances. By engaging children as research subjects the researcher is no longer bound by his or her imagination or the memory of the parent.

These refinements will allow for a more complete understanding of the role children play in active mediation conversations. Continued refinement and development of a typology of responses will allow for those responses to be operationalized for inclusion in future research of both children and adults. Children are capable of a wide variety of unique and creative responses to the conversational advances of adults. These responses change as the child develops physically, cognitively and emotionally. These responses also have the ability to change the entire interaction both in tone and in content. It is for these reasons that children must be considered of the utmost importance, not only in the research questions we ask but in the methodologies we employ as well.
References


Hicks, D. J. (1968). Effects of co-observer’s sanctions and adult presence on imitative aggression. *Child Development, 38,* 303-309.


Appendix A: Coding Scheme

Code each behavior for the presence or absence of the following types of behaviors first:

**Approach:** Any behavior in which the child actively engages in or attempts to instigate discussion about television. 0 = not present 1 = present

**Avoid:** Any behavior in which the child attempts to terminate a discussion about television or remove themselves from the discussion physically. 0 = not present 1 = present

1 = present

**Ignore:** Any time a child attempts to avoid a conversation by ignoring the adult.

0 = not present 1 = present

**Other:** a behavior that does not fall into these three categories is considered “other” it will be designated as three 0s
Approach Responses:

For all behaviors where approach was coded as 1, please code that behavior for the presence or absence of the following specific behaviors.

**Story related**: 1 = yes – the child makes comments that are directly related to actions in the story such as motivations and behaviors of characters

2 = no – the child makes comments about the content but they are not related to the story, such as shouting the name of a character, or repeating a line.

3 = too broad the child makes comments but the responses does not make it clear if they are story related or not

**Listens** – a comment directly related to the child listening in to adults such as “she listens” or “He pays attention.” 0 = not present 1 = present

**Engage** – a comment that the child engages in the conversation such as “he asks questions” or “he tells me about his favorite show.” 0 = not present 1 = present

**Commercial/Purchase** – a comment directly related to a commercial or a request to purchase a product. 0 = not present 1 = present

**Real world connection** – the child makes a connection between television and real life, this can be talking about the weather tomorrow or discussing something learned in class. 0 = not present 1 = present

**Rules** – The child engages in a conversation about television rules. 0 = not present
1 = present

**Approach Behaviors Cont.**

**Topics –**

News, 0 = not present 1 = present

Sports, 0 = not present 1 = present

Cartoons, 0 = not present 1 = present

Politics, 0 = not present 1 = present

Weather, 0 = not present 1 = present
Avoid Behaviors:

For all behaviors where avoid was coded as 1, please code that behavior for the presence or absence of the following specific behaviors.

**Direct Confrontation:** The child verbally claims they do not want to discuss a topic.

0 = not present 1 = present

**Change subject:** The child attempts to change the subject to something else.

0 = not present 1 = present

**Short Response:** The child engages in one or two word responses, like “huh” or “whatever.” 0 = not present 1 = present

**Request:** The child makes a verbal request to engage in something other than the topic at hand, this could be a request to change the topic or a request to engage in another behavior. 0 = not present 1 = present

**Verbal:** The child engages in a verbal attempt to end the conversation. 0 = not present 1 = present

**Physical:** The child engages in a physical behavior to end the conversation, this could be turning away or leaving the room or playing with a toy. 0 = not present 1 = present

**Props:** The child uses a toy or computer or another physical object to end the conversation. 0 = not present 1 = present
Leaves the Room: The child leaves the room. 0 = not present 1 = present
Ignore Behaviors:

For all behaviors where ignore was coded as 1, please code that behavior for the presence or absence of the following specific behaviors.

**Ignores**: any behavior that directly states that the child ignores, or that the child “zones out” or “tunes out.” 0 = not present 1 = present

**Doesn’t Respond**: A behavior that shows the child is ignoring the adult by stating what they are “not doing” such as “doesn’t listen to me” or “doesn’t answer.” 0 = not present 1 = present