

Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007

Report of the Media and Society Research Project

December 2007

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Overview

1 Introduction

Australian families are connected to each other and the world through networked and mobile communications and through traditional media. This has significant benefits for children and families including learning, keeping in touch, and relaxation, but it also brings new challenges.

Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007 derives from ACMA's Media and Society research project and offers an up-to-date picture of how families with children negotiate electronic media and communication in everyday life.

The day-to-day media and communications experiences of young people—what devices they use, when, where and for how long—help to illustrate the importance of these activities to Australian families, regardless of income, education and location. The proliferation of media platforms and communications services means families now face unprecedented choices about how they communicate and consume media. The way parents negotiate choices about these activities provides useful insights into the risks and benefits associated with them.

The findings in this report provide a snapshot of a quickly evolving environment. Many of the technologies now used by young people—the internet, email, instant messaging, chat rooms, video sharing, mobile phones, and portable music players—were barely present in the home a decade ago, if at all. Many of the services that were available—television, radio, and video games—remain central to families' media use today.

The report synthesises two major studies: community research involving a national survey of 751 Australian families, including time-use diaries for 1,003 children aged 8–17 years; and a review of the academic research literature about the influences of electronic media and communication. The survey identifies the electronic media and communications devices in family homes, the time children spend using them, parental attitudes to that use, and the way families negotiate children's use of media and communications. Comparisons with findings of a similar study in 1995 are included where available, identifying changes over the past 12 years.

This overview summarises the key themes from the two studies, informed where appropriate by other relevant Australian and overseas social research. The full research results from the two consultancies are included in the report.

2 The importance of electronic media and communications

MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS ARE UBIQUITOUS

Australian family households are technology rich, with most families having three or more televisions, and three or more mobile phones. Almost every household has a computer and DVD player. Nine in 10 Australian

Most families have three or more televisions, and three or more mobile phones.

families have an internet connection, and three-quarters of families have broadband.

Families appear to be more connected than households generally. Other ACMA research¹ has found that fewer than eight in 10 Australian households (with and without children) had an internet connection, and fewer than six in 10 had broadband. Mobile phones are found in almost 90 per cent of Australian households, but in families the figure is more than 95 per cent.

Nine in 10 families have an internet connection, and three-quarters have broadband.

KEY TRENDS SINCE 1995

The nature of children's and teenagers' discretionary activities has changed in many ways since 1995. There are more electronic media and communication activities to choose from in 2007. The biggest change is the internet. Family households with internet connections have increased from seven per cent in 1995 to 91 per cent in 2007, and the internet now has a very significant place in children's lives. The community research indicates that eight to 17 year olds spend on average about an hour and a quarter a day online, and parents strongly indicate that the internet has educational benefits for their children.

Eight to 17 year olds spend on average about an hour and a quarter a day online.

Compared with 1995, children and young people spend, on average, an extra 12 minutes per day playing computer or video games. This increase is mostly attributable to increases by boys.

In 1996, around one in three Australian households (with or without children) had a mobile phone.² The community research data gathered for this project shows that virtually every family now has at least one mobile phone, with an average of almost three mobile phones per family.

Despite these changes, other aspects of young people's discretionary time are notably stable. Electronic media and communication activities overall take up around half of children and young people's aggregate discretionary time, and this proportion hasn't changed since 1995.

Watching television takes up just under two hours per day.

Watching television remains the electronic media or communication activity that takes up the largest amount of time for young people aged 8–17 years (an average of just under two hours per day), but this is about 10 minutes per day

less than they watched in 1995.

Compared with 1995, Australian children aged 8–17 years spend a similar amount of time, or more, on most of the measured media and non-media leisure activities.

Time spent by young people on electronic media and communication activities is sometimes contrasted to the time spent doing sport and other physical activities. Interestingly, and seemingly consistent with trends identified in other Australian data,³ children aged 8–17 in

¹ Data for all Australian households comes from ACMA 2007, *Telecommunications today – consumer attitudes to take-up and use*, ACMA, Canberra <www.acma.gov.au/WEB/STANDARD/pc=PC_9058>.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998, *Household use of Information Technology*, Cat. no. 8146.0, ABS, Canberra

³ See e.g. the NSW Schools Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey (SPANS) 2004 (Booth M, Okley AD, Denney-Wilson E, Hardy L, Yang B, Dobbins T (2006). *NSW Schools Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey (SPANS) 2004: Full Report* Sydney: NSW Department of Health), which found that there has been a significant increase in the prevalence of high school students participating in the recommended daily amount of physical activity between 1985 and 2004. See also the Survey of Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities conducted in April 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, *Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities*, Cat. no. 4901.0, ABS, Canberra), which found marginal increases in children's (5–14 years) participation in organised sport between 2000 to 2006.

our survey reported spending more time doing physical activity compared with 1995, despite the increased choice of media and communication activities. They also spend more time watching DVDs or videos, and listening to recorded music on CDs and, now, MP3 players. On the other hand, the time spent doing other activities, such as going out, doing homework and listening to the radio, has stayed about the same.

Given the limits placed on discretionary time by non-discretionary activities such as sleep and school, one likely explanation for the extra time spent on activities is that two or more activities are done simultaneously, which is known as multi-tasking.

3 The place of electronic media and communications in children's lives

MEDIA IS HALF THE STORY

The community research provides a snapshot of the balance children and young people achieve between media and non-media activities. Electronic media and communication activities have a prominent place in the leisure time of children in Australian families, but not to an overwhelming extent. On average, every discretionary hour spent consuming media or communicating using electronic devices is matched by a similar amount of time spent doing physical activity, hanging out, playing or other non-media activities.

When asked about the things they most like to do with other people, children nominate non-media activities more frequently than media activities. The most popular are physical activities, followed by going out, general activities (such as playing musical instruments, or with toys or pets), and simply 'hanging out/veging out.' This is consistent with academic research findings that, when provided with other leisure options, children's first preference is often for non-media activities.

In company, children prefer non-media activities.

Media is particularly important as a solo pursuit.

Media is particularly important as a solo pursuit. When asked what they most like to do by themselves, children indicate three media activities in their top four: watching free-to-air television, listening to recorded music, and gaming. But they also nominate activities such as reading and drawing as frequently as television viewing, as their favourite things to do when alone.

TELEVISION: STILL THE MAJOR MEDIA ACTIVITY

Despite the increase in media choices, television (free-to-air and subscription) remains the most time-consuming leisure activity for children and young people. The average time spent watching television is just under two hours per day, and includes 27 minutes per day of subscription television viewing. While other electronic media and communication activities demonstrate strong variations in age, time spent watching television remains constant from the age of eight to 17 years (however, the mix of free-to-air and subscription does show age-related trends, discussed below). More than 99 per cent of parents report that their child watches television at some time (only three children are said to watch none). The important place of television in family lives is reinforced by the academic literature review which concludes that television is still the most pervasive and influential media in the lives of children and adults, and that watching television, and talking about it, are important to social interaction and 'cultural literacy,' particularly for older children.

Watching television, and talking about it, are important parts of social interaction and 'cultural literacy.'

However, time spent watching television has decreased by about 10 minutes per day since 1995. This decline is mostly attributable to boys, whose television viewing has dropped 20 minutes a day; girls' average viewing time decreased by three minutes per day over the period. A reduction in children's television viewing was also reported in recent ACMA analysis of OzTAM ratings data on children's television viewing patterns.⁴

The most popular time for children and young people to watch television is between 6.00 and 9.00 pm, followed by 3.00–6.00 pm, whether during the week or on weekends. This also fits with recent ACMA analysis of OzTAM ratings data.⁵

Convergence between traditionally separate media and communications forms has been an area of increasing interest. The community research provides early indications of convergence between certain electronic media and communication activities in young people's lives. For example, the internet is becoming established as one way of viewing and accessing audio-visual content. Almost half of young people reported watching television shows, movies, cartoons or video clips from the internet, and one in five do so at least weekly. On average, these activities take up about seven minutes per day for young people, compared with almost two hours per day for television itself.

Almost half of young people reported watching television shows, movies, cartoons or video clips from the internet.

Free-to-air television

Of all the leisure activities we asked about in our survey, both media-related and non-media-related, more children and young people participated in watching free-to-air television than any other leisure activity. Over the three days they completed diaries, 88 per cent of children and young people watched some free-to-air television

Overall, children spend more time watching free-to-air television (one hour 27 minutes) than any other activity. ACMA analysis of 2006 OzTAM ratings figures suggests that children (5–17 years) watch on average one hour 26 minutes of free-to-air television per day.⁶ Availability of subscription television was very limited in 1995,⁷ so almost all of the two hours and five minutes spent watching television in 1995 was likely to be taken up by free-to-air television viewing. On this basis, children 8–17 years in 2007 watch approximately 40 minutes per day less free-to-air television than in 1995.

Time spent watching free-to-air television increases as children get older, with teenagers aged 15–17 watching around 10 minutes more per day than children aged 8–11. Of children and young people who watch free-to-air television, four-fifths watch it between 6.00 and 9.00 pm on weekdays. Approximately half of this group watch it between 3.00 and 6.00 pm on weekdays, and almost as many watch it after 9.00 pm.

Subscription television

Households with children are more likely to have subscription television than households without children. Subscription television is available to 32 per cent of families, and 15 per

⁴ See ACMA 2007, *Children's Viewing Patterns on Commercial, Free-to-air and Subscription Television: Report analysing audience and ratings data for 2001, 2005 and 2006*, ACMA, Canberra, <www.acma.gov.au/WEB/STANDARD/pc=PC_310262#IFC>.

⁵ See *Children's Viewing Patterns on Commercial, Free-to-air and Subscription Television*.

⁶ See p. 15 of *Children's Viewing Patterns on Commercial, Free-to-air and Subscription Television*.

⁷ See Australian Subscription Television and Radio Association 2007, *History of Subscription TV*, ASTRA, viewed 8/08/07 <www.astra.org.au/article.asp?section=2&option=1&content=2>.

cent of televisions are connected to subscription television services. In 2006, ACMA research found that 26 per cent of all Australian households had subscription television.⁸

The average viewing time of children and young people in households with access to subscription television is one hour a day. This group also watches 10 minutes more television of any kind per day compared with the average for all children and young people in the survey.

Unlike free-to-air television, time spent viewing subscription television decreases with age, and subscription television takes up a greater share of television viewing time among 8–11 year olds (27 per cent of television time) than among 15–17 year olds (18 per cent).

Compared to free-to-air television, viewing of subscription television is distributed differently across the day. Subscription television is, proportionately, watched more from 9.00 am–12 noon on weekends, and between 3.00 and 6.00 pm on weekdays. This is similar to the pattern for watching DVDs and movies.

Australian children are less likely to live in multi-channel homes than are their US or UK counterparts. In 2004, four in five US families had cable or satellite television.⁹ In 2006, three-quarters of UK children lived in homes with access to multi-channel services.¹⁰

TECHNOLOGY IN THE HOME

Communications and media technology available to Australian families has changed significantly since 1995. Then, less than 10 per cent of families had access to the internet. Now, less than 10 per cent of homes are without it.

In 1995, less than 10 per cent of families had access to the internet. Now, less than 10 per cent of homes are without it.

In 1995 more than 90 per cent of homes had a video player or recorder. In 2007 DVD players are in almost every home.

Children and families have greater access to gaming devices than in 1995, with game consoles now in three-quarters of homes.

Families have also embraced portable digital music players, with about three-quarters of households having a device such as an iPod or MP3 player.

Other technologies now found in Australian homes include portable DVD players, DVD recorders and hard drive recorders, though these are present in less than one-third of households.

Home internet access seems to be partly a function of means—94 per cent of households with incomes of more than \$35,000 are online, compared with 75 per cent of those on less than \$35,000. The type of internet connection is even more closely correlated with income—broadband internet is present in 91 per cent of households with incomes of more than \$100,000, down to 50 per cent of those on less than \$35,000. Similar trends are seen with households where the parent did not finish secondary school, and those with single parents.

Televisions were ubiquitous in 1995, and remain so in 2007. In 1995, three-quarters of families had two or more televisions. In 2007, 90 per cent of families have two or more televisions and

... 90 per cent of families have two or more televisions.

⁸ ACMA 2006, *Digital Media in Australian Homes – 2006*, ACMA, Canberra <www.acma.gov.au/WEB/STANDARD//pc=PC_91723>

⁹ Kaiser Family Foundation 2005, *Generation M: Media in the lives of 8–18 year olds*, Kaiser Family Foundation, <www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia030905pkg.cfm>

¹⁰ Office of Communications (Ofcom) 2006, *Media Literacy Audit: Report on media literacy amongst children*, Ofcom <www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/children/>

one quarter of homes have four or more. One third of families (32 per cent) have access to digital free-to-air television.

While some media and communications devices appear to be expensive luxury items, many are not. An analysis of household income suggests that electronic media and communications devices are important to all families, even where their income is low. Of households with an income of less than \$35,000, three-quarters have internet access and greater proportions have at least one DVD player, game console, and mobile phone. However, household income does have a considerable impact on the likelihood of having subscription television, digital free-to-air television and devices such as DVD recorders, hard drive recorders or portable DVD players.

TECHNOLOGY IN CHILDREN'S BEDROOMS

Australian children have less opportunity to watch television in their bedrooms than their counterparts in the US and UK. One in five Australian children has a television in their bedroom (this is slightly fewer than in 1995). In the US, research suggests that seven out of 10 children aged 8–18 years have a television in their bedroom,¹¹ and in the UK, studies have indicated three-quarters of children 8–15 years have a television in their bedroom.¹² The community research found subscription television in one per cent of children's bedrooms. In 2004, over one in three US children had cable or satellite television in their bedrooms.¹³

More affluent households are less likely to have either a television or a DVD player in any of their children's rooms, compared to those with lower incomes. Televisions and DVD players are more often in children's rooms where the parent surveyed does not have any tertiary education or is a single parent.

One in five children have a computer in their bedroom.

Computers are increasingly found in children's bedrooms, with one in five children aged eight to 17 having a computer in their bedroom, up from around 10 per cent in 1995. Half of those computers have an internet connection, almost of all which are broadband connections.

Having a computer in any of the children's bedrooms is unlike the patterns seen for televisions in bedrooms, with higher income families more likely to have a computer in their children's bedroom.

One in 10 children has a game console in their room.

There appear to be certain threshold ages for children to have electronic media devices in their bedrooms—that is, the age where the proportion of children with a particular device jumps markedly. For example, for televisions, the age is 11, while for DVD players, computers and internet connections, the age is 14. It also appears that some of these devices are moved out of bedrooms when teenagers turn 17, with significant drops in the proportion of 17 year olds with televisions, for example, compared with 16 year olds.

AGE AND DEVELOPMENT DIFFERENCES

Understanding how media and communication fit in to the lives of children involves an appreciation of how children develop from infants through to adulthood. Clear age and development-related trends are apparent from the research conducted for this report.

¹¹ Kaiser Family Foundation 2005, *Generation M: Media in the lives of 8–18 year olds*

¹² Office of Communications (Ofcom) 2006, *Media Literacy Audit: Report on media literacy amongst children*, Ofcom <www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/children/>

¹³ Kaiser Family Foundation 2005, *Generation M: Media in the lives of 8–18 year olds*, Kaiser Family Foundation, <www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia030905pkg.cfm>

The review of academic literature found that children's patterns of media and non-media leisure change over the course of their development and that adolescents generally develop more specialised and diverse media and leisure practices. The survey data supports this general picture, finding wide variations in how children and young people of different ages make use of electronic media and communications devices.

As they approach adulthood, young people dedicate a greater proportion of their aggregate discretionary time to electronic media and communication activities, from two-fifths of aggregate discretionary time at ages 8–11, to almost three-fifths in the later teenage years.

Older teenagers spend almost five times as much time online than the younger children in the study.

Overall, just over half the children in our study use a mobile phone, but this figure hides a strong age variation: few eight year olds use a mobile, but around nine in 10 17 year olds do. Similarly, the amount of time spent messaging increases from an average of one minute per day for 8–11 year olds, to half an hour for 15–17 year olds.

Messaging increases from one minute per day for 8–11 year olds, to half an hour for 15–17 year olds.

Unlike many other age-related trends with electronic media use and communication, gaming grows to a peak then declines through the teenage years. Seventy per cent of eight year olds participate in some sort of gaming, rising to 80 per cent at 11, reducing to around 60 per cent at age 17. Time spent gaming online against other players, however, peaks in the later teenage years, taking up an average of about 25 minutes per day for 15–17 year olds.

Time spent gaming online against other players peaks in the later teenage years.

Reflected in the time they spend, and the proportions who participate, the electronic media and communication preferences of children and young people change markedly as they age. Children at the younger end of the surveyed group said they preferred watching television or movies, and playing computer games. Teenagers preferred communicating using a phone or the internet and listening to recorded music. Listening time for recorded music is more than five times greater for 15–17 year olds at 46 minutes per day, than for 8–11 year olds, at eight minutes.

GENDER

The most significant gender difference in the use of electronic media and communications devices relates to gaming. Boys indicate a much stronger preference to play games than girls, more boys than girls play them and they spend more time doing so. When asked what they most like to do when by themselves, half of the boys nominated gaming in their top three, compared to one in seven girls. Boys on average spend almost an hour a day gaming, while girls spend less than half an hour. Four-fifths of boys participated in gaming, compared with three-fifths of girls.

Girls report more mobile phone use than boys, with almost two-thirds of girls using a mobile phone, but less than half of boys.

Almost two-thirds of girls use a mobile phone, but less than half of boys do.

Although boys and girls are just as likely to use the internet overall, clear gender trends are evident in what the internet is used for. More girls than boys use the internet for communicating with others through email and instant messaging, while boys spend a greater proportion of their online time than girls playing games against others. This is consistent with the patterns observed in 2004 data

reported in *kidsonline@home*, where girls were more likely to use communication applications online, and boys more likely to use entertainment applications.¹⁴

Just over eight in 10 children and young people reported listening to the radio over the three-day study period and girls reported this activity more frequently than boys. More girls also listen to recorded music and this is most strongly reflected in the average amount of time spent listening to recorded music, with girls spending around 25 minutes per day, compared with boys who spend less than 20 minutes per day.

INTERNET USE

One of the expectations leading into the research was that use of the internet would be a significant new factor in children and young people's time budgets. This expectation has been well and truly borne out. It is also clear that, as with adults, children and young people use this technology for a diverse range of communication and media activities.

The academic literature on internet use indicates that despite concerns and potential risks, children and young people use the internet for communication and the management of interpersonal relationships, identity building, creative activities, and for learning.

In order of proportion participating, children and young people use the internet for homework, messaging or chatting, unspecified other activities, online gaming against other players, social websites or user-generated content sites, emailing, and watching audio-visual material. This mix of activities illustrates that time spent online is hard to characterise as a single kind of activity. Being online often involves communicating and connecting with others, and it is sometimes a joint activity with another person who is not physically present. It can also involve contributing to user-generated web content. And sometimes it is more like consuming traditional media such as television or recorded music.

On average, children 8–17 years spend about one and a quarter hours online every day, including homework and online gaming against others. For teenagers 15–17 years, this rises to just under two and a half hours a day. Looking at this group of older teenagers, time spent online is split between communication activities such as emailing, messaging or chatting (around 45 minutes per day), homework (25 minutes), online gaming against others (23 minutes), social networking or user-generated content sites (24 minutes), viewing audio-visual content (14 minutes), along with other activities.

The internet does not take up as much time for the younger children in our study—8–11 year olds spend 30 minutes a day online. The biggest single contributor to this is online gaming against other players, which takes up 11 minutes per day.

USER-GENERATED CONTENT

Recent interest in internet use has highlighted young people's engagement with the interactive web ('Web 2.0'): Web 2.0 includes user-generated content websites such as YouTube and Flickr, and social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook.

Over 40 per cent of children and young people have some of their own material on the internet and a third have a page on a social networking site.

Older teenagers are active in Web 2.0. From age 14 onwards, 70 per cent or more of teenagers are engaged in some form of web authorship. Among 16–17 year olds, two-thirds have an online profile on a website such as MySpace, 40 per cent have posted their own photographs

¹⁴ Australian Broadcasting Authority and NetAlert Limited 2005, *kidsonline@home: Internet use in Australian homes*, prepared by Netratings Australia Pty Ltd, ABA and NetAlert Limited, Sydney, www.acma.gov.au/webwr/_assets/main/lib10852/kidsonline.pdf

or artwork on the web, and one in six have their own blog. Production of the more complex forms of media such as videos or original music is less common, even among older teenagers. Around one in eight 14–17 year olds say that they have a video of their own posted online, fewer than one in 10 have their own music or music compilation posted online.

Around 70 per cent of girls aged 14–17 have a MySpace or similar profile, compared with 50 per cent of boys.

Authoring of web content is also more commonly reported by girls than boys. This is particularly evident when it came to having a profile on a user-generated website and having artwork or photos posted online, with around 70 per cent of girls aged 14–17 having a MySpace or similar profile, compared with 50 per cent of boys at that age.

MULTI-TASKING

Recent overseas research has suggested that modern teenagers fit more activities into their available leisure time by undertaking two or more activities simultaneously, or ‘multi-tasking.’¹⁵ The community research diaries indicate that of an average of about seven hours per day available to spend on discretionary activities (media and non-media), almost three hours is spent doing activities simultaneously.¹⁶ Older teenagers squeeze 12 hours’ worth of activities into their seven hours of discretionary time, while the 8–11 year olds fit in a little less than nine hours’ worth.

Some activities are more prone to multi-tasking than others—key among them is the use of mobile phones. Twenty per cent of time spent on mobiles is also spent watching television or DVDs, and 10 per cent is spent also listening to the radio. Ten per cent of internet time is also spent watching television or DVDs, and the same proportion is spent listening to music or the radio.

4 Electronic media and communications in families

A more complex and fluid media environment presents greater challenges for parents in 2007 than it did in 1995. The community research reveals that Australian families have embraced the full range of electronic media and communication opportunities, understanding that they have both pros and cons.

Their child’s use of the internet is the most concerning media or communications activity for parents.

When asked to rate their level of concern about a range of possible issues, media and communication related concerns do not stand out from other issues, such as their child’s safety and security, exposure to drugs and alcohol, educational opportunities and friends. Of the media and communication activities, the most concerning is their

child’s use of the internet, with two in five parents expressing some level of concern.

Television watching and gaming come next followed by mobile phone use, and finally radio listening, which is of concern to one in five parents.

In considering their child’s television viewing, gaming, internet use and mobile phone use, the vast majority of parents (80–90 per cent) indicate that each is fairly easy or very easy to manage.

The vast majority of parents say that their child’s television viewing, gaming, internet use and mobile phone use is easy to manage.

¹⁵ See, e.g. Kaiser Family Foundation 2005, *Generation M: Media in the lives of 8–18 year olds*, Kaiser Family Foundation, www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia030905pkg.cfm.

¹⁶ See section 3.2.4 of the community research report for an explanation of how discretionary time is calculated, particularly as it relates to measures of simultaneous activities.

PARENTS SEE VALUE IN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

While they have some concerns, parents recognise a large range of benefits from media and communication activities. Almost all parents see the internet as beneficial to their child, and four-fifths see benefits in their child's television watching and use of a mobile phone. Gaming divides parents fairly evenly, with just over half of parents seeing benefits in their child's gaming, but just under half seeing few or no benefits.

Almost all parents see the internet as beneficial to their child.

Almost all parents say that the internet provides learning or educational opportunities for their children, while the main benefits of watching television are perceived to be its educational value and its contribution towards their children keeping in touch with the world around them.

Mobile phones give parents peace of mind about their child's safety and security, for example, enabling the child to make a phone call in an emergency and the parents to maintain contact with their child. While the academic research literature identifies some concerns about children's exposure to illegal content, financial exploitation and bullying through mobile phone use, parents in our study did not raise these issues.

The biggest benefits of video games are seen to be their role in developing the child's hand-eye coordination, and in their entertainment value.

AGE AND GENDER: PARENTAL VIEWS

The age of their child is the most influential factor in determining parents' level of concern about each technology type. Parents express concerns about television viewing more frequently in relation to younger children, whereas gaming concerns are more frequent in relation to 12–14 year olds. Concerns about internet use are more common for parents of 12–17 year olds, and mobile phone concerns are focused on the 13–17 year old age bracket.

A clear and consistent age trend is seen with managing the internet—it gets harder as children get older. When asked to rank the ease or difficulty of managing their child's use of the internet, parents of teenagers are more likely to say that it is difficult than parents of younger children.

Parents of boys are more often concerned about video and computer games than parents of girls, but the reverse is evident for use of mobile phones.

The internet is seen as being more beneficial where the child is older than nine. Around 40 per cent of parents recognise many benefits for children aged eight to nine years, compared to about 60 per cent of parents of teenagers aged 14–16 years.

FAMILY TIME

While children and young people often enjoy media and communications activities privately or with friends, these activities also play a role in family time. Almost half the time children and young people spend watching television is spent with adults and almost all parents reported spending some time discussing adult concepts on television with their children.

Children and young people share around two-fifths of time they spend listening to music or the radio with adults, the same proportion of listening time they share with their peers.

Australian and UK research indicates that although adolescents most value using the mobile to communicate with their peers, they also value the ability to keep in touch with family.¹⁷

Although it is more of an occasional or rare practice, four in five parents of gamers reported playing games with their child at some stage. This is more commonly reported by parents of younger children and by younger parents. The main reason parents gave for playing games with their child is that games can provide a good way of doing things together and connecting. Diary data indicates that children and young people shared 15 per cent of time spent gaming with adults.

PARENT COMFORT WITH TELEVISION

The literature review demonstrates that the influences of television on children have been relatively heavily studied by researchers since its introduction more than fifty years ago.

In this context it is interesting to note that parents indicate a degree of comfort about the place of television in the family. Parents identify a range of benefits associated with their children's television viewing, and there has been a marked drop in the incidence of rules about television content since 1995. Only half of parents say they have rules or understandings about what their children can watch on television, compared to eight in ten parents in 1995. There is also a smaller drop in the proportion of households with rules about when television can be watched.

Nonetheless, 30 per cent of parents expressed some concern about the television programs their child watches. Since 1995, there has been a small increase in the number of parents reporting that they either keep an eye on the screen, or check the program beforehand, when their children are watching television or DVDs or videos.

PARENT COMFORT WITH THE INTERNET

As the community research has demonstrated, the internet is now a prominent feature of the lives of children and young people. Very few of today's parents would have used the internet when they were children or teenagers. As a consequence, in guiding their children's use of the internet, they are less likely to be able to draw from their own experience at that age. Nonetheless, the great majority of parents are comfortable with the internet.

Almost all parents in homes with internet access use it themselves, and nearly seven in 10 use it every day. Almost 90 per cent reported being comfortable using the internet themselves.

5 Managing the influences of electronic media and communications

The academic review of the current state of knowledge about the influences of media on children and families found positives and negatives, which differ between various media and communication activities. Where negative influences have been found, there are indications that some members of the community are more vulnerable than others, and that media activity is only one of the factors influencing a particular outcome. The research literature rarely demonstrates straightforward cause-and-effect relationships between electronic media activities and long-term influences on children. However, a range of strong and noteworthy associations are identified.

¹⁷ See, e.g. The Australian Psychological Society, 2004, *Psychosocial aspects of mobile phone use among adolescents*, Sydney, Australian Psychological Society Ltd. See also: Office of Communications (Ofcom) 2006, *Media Literacy Audit: Report on media literacy amongst children*, Ofcom, UK, <www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/children/>.

Researchers also emphasise that audiences, including children and young people, are active in their media consumption, to a degree and sophistication that is related to their age and development. Children are not simply passive receivers of media, and the way in which media content is understood is mediated by the child. This means that different children will respond to and engage with the same content in different ways.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Children and families choose electronic media and communication activities because they have clear benefits: entertainment, relaxation and education. Parents in the community research nominated these benefits along with learning about other cultures, seeing others' points of view, being inspirational, promoting creativity, as well as the safety, security and social support offered by modern communications.

Children learn from television. They use various media and communication activities in the development of their identities.

Academic research finds that children learn from television, and that children use various media and communication activities in the development of their identities and in providing an important platform for social activity.

Media's capacity to influence beliefs and behaviours can be harnessed to benefit children, for example, to promote physical activity, or through internet-based support services. Watching educational television in early childhood has also been found to be associated with enhanced academic performance in later life.

The academic research literature reports that children view keeping in touch with friends and family as important reasons for having a mobile phone, and that the mobile phone's capacity to provide communication without surveillance may be particularly important to teen social life.

Media's capacity to influence beliefs and behaviours can be harnessed to benefit children.

WHAT ARE THE NEGATIVE INFLUENCES?

Academic research confirms that television violence can be linked to short term increases in aggressive thoughts or behaviour.

Academic research confirms that television violence can be linked to short-term increases in aggressive thoughts or behaviour. It is less clear whether these short-term influences translate into long-term violent behaviour and crime. Research also confirms what many would expect: that television has the potential to influence both children's and adults' perceptions about the world around them.

It would not be ethical to conduct a conclusive experiment to determine whether pornography or sexual content harms children. However, research has shown that children are discomforted by it. Researchers also generally agree that sexually violent content poses a greater risk than non-violent sexual material. In addition, researchers identify a range of risk factors that mediate long term harms of pornography, including prior behavioural disorders.

Research on media and children's health shows connections with poor health outcomes such as overweight and obesity, tobacco and alcohol consumption, mental health concerns and sleeping difficulties.

Research on how media might relate to children's health shows connections with poor outcomes such as overweight and obesity, tobacco and alcohol consumption, mental health concerns and sleeping difficulties. (ACMA is presently considering the issue of food and

beverage advertising directed to children in its review of the Children's Television Standards.¹⁸⁾

Research indicates that while media does have some potential to do harm, the context in which children and families consume media is equally important. Part of that context is the amount of time spent with potentially harmful content.

Also critical is the set of individual circumstances specific to children and families. Put another way, there are 'protective factors': the educational and socio-economic resources of the family and the broader community are important, as are family communication styles, and the strength of family and peer-group norms.

PARENT RESPONSES TO MEDIA INFLUENCES

Previous research suggests that families oversee children's media and communication activities through a range of formal and informal means. There are formal rules and less formal 'understandings' about the content of the activity, the amount of time spent on the activity, and when it occurs. Some families also use technical controls or barriers which may limit or prevent particular activities. There are also a range of parental involvement strategies, including supervision and monitoring, or doing an activity together.¹⁹

Around three in four of the surveyed parents reported having rules about their child's use of the television, internet, mobile phones and video/computer games.

The community research suggests that families negotiate rules, routines and practices to take advantage of the positive influences, and minimise the negative. Around three in four of the surveyed parents reported having rules, understandings or agreements about their child's use of the television, internet, mobile phones and video/computer games.

Time-based rules ensure that media and communication activities fit into everyday routines—for example, almost half of parents have a rule about no television viewing after bedtime. Content rules also reflect parents' concerns that their children engage with material that is appropriate for their age and stage of development.

Overall, parents find television and mobile phones easier to manage than games or the internet.

More parents have rules about when young people can use television, games and the internet than have rules about the content of those activities. For mobile phones, the rules tend to be around how much the phone is used and what it is used for. Using pre-paid phones is the most commonly used technique for limiting or restricting mobile phone use.

Compared with 1995, there have been reductions in the incidence of rules about what games can be played (down from almost 60 per cent to just under 50 per cent of households) and when games can be played (down from 75 per cent to 65 per cent).

Parental mediation tapers off as children age.

Trust plays an important part in how families negotiate the use of electronic media and communications. Eight in 10 parents sometimes trust their children's judgment about activities on

¹⁸ For information on ACMA's review of the Children's Television Standards, see the ACMA website www.acma.gov.au/WEB/STANDARD/pc=PC_310262.

¹⁹ See, e.g. Australian Broadcasting Authority and the Office of Film and Literature Classification 1996, *Families and Electronic Entertainments*, ABA and OFLC, Sydney; Australian Broadcasting Authority and NetAlert Limited 2005, *kidsonline@home: Internet use in Australian homes*, prepared by Netratings Australia Pty Ltd, ABA and NetAlert Limited, Sydney, www.acma.gov.au/webwr/_assets/main/lib10852/kidsonline.pdf.

the internet and what television or DVDs/videos they watch, and around six in 10 usually do so. Age is a significant factor here—while around a third of parents of 8–10 year olds usually allow their child to decide on television or DVDs/videos, more than 80 per cent of parents of 16–17 year olds do so.

Perhaps for this reason, parental mediation tapers off as children age. Television-related rules are in place for almost nine in 10 children aged 8–11, but only for one third of 17 year olds. A similar, but less marked pattern emerges around rules for mobile phone use and gaming.

However, there is an indication that the years of early adolescence are a focus of parental monitoring and negotiation around internet use. For example, rules or understandings about internet use are more often in place for 10–14 year olds than for younger or older children. Specific restrictions relating to adult or sexual content are more likely for those 13 and over, than for those under 13, and content-related arrangements of any sort about internet use are more often in place with 10–14 year olds than with younger or older children.

There is some evidence that parents use the location of a screen as part of their suite of tools in guiding and mediating their children's use. For example, more than 80 per cent of parents reported that they keep an eye on the screen at least some of the time when their child is watching television, DVDs, videos or is using the internet. When asked what ways they have of limiting or checking their children's use of the internet, more than one in five volunteered that they kept the screen in a visible location as one of those methods. This approach is also reflected in the findings that three-fifths of televisions are in public areas of the house, and three-quarters of internet-connected computers are in public areas.

Three-quarters of internet-connected computers are in public areas.

The review of academic research literature shows that certain media content can be difficult or confronting for some children. In this context, it is interesting to look at the extent to which children and young people consume media with adults, or by themselves. One-third of the time spent viewing television or DVDs/videos is spent alone and just under half is spent with adults. In contrast, internet use is more of a solo activity, with three-quarters of internet time spent alone and one-fifth spent with adults.

One-third of the time spent viewing television or DVDs/videos is spent alone. Three-quarters of internet time is spent alone.

While these figures suggest a significant difference between the sociability of television viewing and internet use, closer consideration is required. Time spent 'alone' on the internet includes some time where others are in the same room, and some internet use is inherently social, involving communicating or playing with others over the internet.

Other methods parents use for managing their children's internet use include checking the browser or search history, reported by two-fifths of parents, and blocking or filtering internet content, which was reported by one in five parents.

Parental mediation is a balancing act, and seven out of 10 parents say they are happy for their child to maintain his or her current balance between electronic media and communication activities and other activities. This proportion is down a little from 1995. This figure reflects the broader picture provided by the community research, that while parents have some concerns, overall they appear reasonably comfortable with their children's engagement with electronic media and communication activities.

6 The research

The Media and Society project was conducted with financial support from the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts and comprises two major studies into children, families and electronic media and communications. The community research was conducted by social research consultant Urbis. The Centre for Applied Research in Social Science at the University of New England conducted the review of the academic literature relating to the influences of electronic media and communications devices on children and families.

The community research comprised a survey of 751 families, involving a telephone questionnaire for parents and a three-day time-use diary for 1,003 children aged 8–17 years conducted from March to June 2007 (excluding school holidays). Parents' views about their children's electronic media and communication activities, and the rules and routines families have in place to mediate or regulate those activities, were also surveyed.

One of ACMA's predecessor organisations, the ABA, conducted a national survey of family media use in 1995 in conjunction with the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC), with the results being published as *Families and Electronic Entertainment*.²⁰ Where possible, comparisons with 1995 are included in the report of the community research.

The review of academic research examined the psychological literature about long-term media effects and influences. It has also examined research traditions in communication and cultural studies, sociology, education, and public health to help consider the 'psychological' effects and influences of media and communication activities on family and society more broadly.

Details on the methodology of each of these research projects are contained in the attached reports.

ONGOING AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The review of research literature encompasses a significant range of available academic research, and also identifies a number of areas where more research could be conducted.

Data collected in the community research, in particular from the diaries, may yield further insights following additional analysis. The results may also prompt future research which could include younger children, and also explore the attitudes of children and young people themselves.

There are still many research questions to answer. However, the findings of the Media and Society project should stimulate community discussion and debate, while contributing to ACMA's understanding of the role and influence of media and communication in the lives of children and families.

²⁰ Australian Broadcasting Authority and the Office of Film and Literature Classification 1996, *Families and Electronic Entertainments*, ABA and OFLC, Sydney

