

# SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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## INTRODUCTION

To provide current, factual information on the role of media in children's lives and what young people themselves have to say about it, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) commissioned Erin Research to conduct definitive research on Canadian children's experience with communications media.

The research involved 5,756 students in Grades 3 to 10 in every province and territory. This is the first survey of this size to question young people on all the media they use, what satisfactions they get from media and whether the violence in their daily media consumption influences their behaviours and values. The participants in the study are representative of the population on the basis of age, gender, region, French and English language use, Public and Catholic school boards and urban-rural environments. Margins of error for percentage results for the full sample are  $\pm 1.3$  percent, 19 times out of 20.

The survey was designed by Erin Research following consultation with the Canadian Teachers' Federation and the Media Awareness Network (MNet). In all, 122 different schools participated, representing 93 percent of the classes that were originally selected. This is an exceptional response rate.

The Erin survey provides a solid baseline against which to measure change in Canadian children's use of, and relationship to, media. It will enable parents, educators and others to act in informed, supportive and creative ways to give young Canadians the best that the world of media can offer.

## IT'S THE WEEKEND

Kids' selected two items from a list of ten possible activities that they would choose to do during their free time on the weekend.

- Girls' most popular activity is hanging out with friends. This rises from 20 percent in Grade 3 to 38 percent in Grade 10. Social activities – friends and shopping – become girls' clear priorities as they grow older. TV viewing, reading for pleasure and sports all decline. For girls, choosing computer games reaches a high of only 6 percent in Grade 4 and then drops off.
- Boys want to hang out with friends too particularly as they grow older. However, computer games are also a highly favoured activity.
- The younger kids are the ones most interested in electronic entertainment (TV, videos, Internet and computer games) on the weekend. In Grade 3,

these media account for 50 percent of boys' choices and 24 percent of girls' choices.

- For both genders, electronic entertainment drops in popularity as a choice of weekend activity, but still remains twice as popular among boys as among girls (34 percent of Grade 10 boys' choices versus 16 percent of Grade 10 girls).

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### KIDS' DAILY ACTIVITIES

- Watching TV is a daily pastime for 75 percent of children, both boys and girls from Grade 3 to Grade 10.
- The youngest kids are the most frequent video and computer-game players. Almost 60 percent of boys in Grades 3-6 play video or computer games almost every day; even in Grade 10, 38 percent of boys chart it as a daily activity. For girls, the picture is very different: 33 percent of Grade 3 girls play interactive games every day; by Grade 10, the figure has dropped to 6 percent.
- Instant messaging is the new on-line communications medium of choice for kids, with 49 percent of kids in Grades 7-10 using it almost every day and an additional 20 percent using it several times a week.
- Video and DVD are also an important part of the activity landscape of young people, with 24 percent in Grades 3 to 6 and 17 percent in Grades 7 to 10 watching them almost every day. An additional 42 percent screen them a few times a week.
- For both boys and girls, reading for pleasure decreases consistently with age.

### TELEVISION

In a series of open-ended questions, kids listed three shows they liked most and then identified their favourite one.

- Young people's choices converge on a small set of popular shows: 17 titles account for 50 percent of choices. *The Simpsons* and *Friends* are at the top of the pyramid.
- Boys' top choices emphasize animated programs, comedy and sports. Girls' top choices tend to feature people in supposedly realistic situations and often focus on social relationships.

- Children of all ages watch *The Simpsons* but for both Francophone and Anglophone kids, from Grades 3 to 10, boys' rate of preference for *The Simpsons* is about twice as high as that of the girls.
- Francophone kids who live inside and outside of Quebec choose different favourite TV programs. In both the younger and older age groups, those who live in Quebec choose more Quebec-based programs than those who live outside Quebec. For québécois students in Grades 3-6, 30 percent of their top 10 programs are made in Quebec versus 10 percent for Francophones in other parts of the country. For students in Grades 7-10, the differences become even more pronounced. For québécois teens, 60 percent of their top 10 favourite programs originate in Quebec, versus 10 percent for Francophone teens outside Quebec.

In another series of open-ended questions, kids chose their two least favourite programs.

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- Kids' consistently dislike the same shows, regardless of grade, language or gender. Their least favourite programs include certain shows aimed at younger children (*Barney*, *Teletubbies*, *Caillou*), news and, for older teens -- both boys and girls -- soap operas.

To find out why kids like and dislike TV programs, they were asked to rate their favourite TV program according to ten different attributes.

- The key attributes of kids' favourite TV programs appear to be "Exciting" and "Funny". Equally important for girls is that the program is **not** violent.
- The majority of kids' favourite programs do not rate high for violence.

### **Television News**

- The kids surveyed identify the news as one of their most disliked programs but children of all ages watch it. A large majority agree that the news makes them better informed.
- Frequent news watchers are more concerned than others about the larger world (64 percent compared to 52 percent of infrequent news watchers) but they also feel more motivated to do something about it.
- Younger children are the ones most frightened by the news, feeling that their personal safety is at risk (43 percent of girls and 28 percent of boys in Grades 3 and 4). Though young people become less afraid as they grow older, they are also less likely to say that they can make a difference.

Survey respondents were also asked to: *write two things you like about TV* and *write two things you don't like about TV*. For a sample of kids' responses from "Nunavut to Labrador, Montreal to Red Deer", see pp. 34-38.

## COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAMES

In another series of open-ended questions, respondents listed their three favourite computer or video games.

- One of the top choices for both Francophone and Anglophone boys in Grades 3-6 is *Grand Theft Auto*, an ultra-violent action game aimed at mature audiences, which involves murder, bludgeoning and prostitution. For Anglophone boys in the Grade 7-10 category, *Grand Theft Auto* is the run-away favourite title, being chosen by one-third of the respondents in this group. It is much less popular among Francophone boys, for whom hockey rates number one.

- For boys in Grades 3 to 6, a strong link exists between their favourite computer and video games and TV shows and movies (*James Bond, Lord of the Rings, Spiderman, and Yu-Gi-Oh!*). For boys in Grades 7 to 10, the main focus is on action/fantasy/strategy and role-playing games.

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- For girls in Grades 3 to 6, three Internet titles (*The Sims*, *Neopet* and *Miscellaneous Internet Games*) combined are even more popular than the young girls' first choice of *Mario*. These games offer both social interaction and "story". Among older girls, Anglophones and Francophones make very similar choices. Traditional and "classic" games such as *Tetris*, *Donkey Kong* and *Zelda* still retain some popularity with girls in this age group.
- Both boys and girls identified *Exciting* as the primary quality of good games, followed by a competitive element, *I like beating other players, or my best score*. Girls' ratings, however, are well below those of boys. Boys seem to be attracted to attributes of fantasy, to characters who do things they can't, and to violence.
- M-rated games never really catch on among girls. Among boys, however, there is a steady increase in use up to grade 8, where their popularity appears to plateau. Though boys rate their TV shows as having rather little violence (38 out of 100), their computer games have considerably more violence (62 out of 100). For girls, favourite TV shows and favourite computer games are both low on violence (20 and 27 out of 100 respectively).

In response to open-ended questions, kids named two games they disliked and indicated what was wrong with those games.

- Games fail mainly because of lack of speed and lack of action. Excessive violence was cited as another reason by 60 percent of the girls and 33 percent of the boys.

### MEDIA IN THE HOME

- Forty-eight percent of the children surveyed have their own TV set and 35 percent have their own VCR. Twenty-six percent have a computer with an internet connection for their personal use.
- Ten percent of children in Grades 3 to 6 have their own cell phone. By Grade 10, that number has risen to 22 percent. Sixty-two percent of the children surveyed said their family has a cell phone.

### MEDIA USE IN THE HOME

This study focuses primarily on television, videos and computer games, media which children use mainly in their own homes and in the homes of their friends.

- A large number of children claim to have experienced no parental guidance on what they can watch, what they can play, or for how long.

- In Grades 3 to 6, roughly 30 percent of kids claim that they never have any adult input about what TV shows they can watch. By Grade 6, 50 percent report no adult input as to how long they can watch. In Grade 8, the figures for those who experience no parental supervision of their TV viewing rises to approximately 60 percent. On the other hand, close to 90 percent of children report that they watch TV with their family either “most of the time” or “sometimes”, and this pattern remains fairly constant from Grade 3 to Grade 10.

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- While watching TV is still a communal activity (since parents also watch sometimes or most of the time), game-playing seems to be more solitary.
- Even for children in Grades 3 and 4, the top figure for parental involvement of any kind never rises above 50 percent. By the time students reach Grade 7, almost 75 percent of adults never tell children what video or computer games they can or cannot play.
- The majority of parents have never talked with their kids about racism, sexism or violence in the media. When they do, they are more likely to talk with boys about violence and with girls about racism. Sexism in the media is the topic least likely to be discussed between parents and their children of either gender.
- Nineteen percent of the kids surveyed say that their TV set possess a V-chip which allows parents to block certain television channels or programs that they do not wish children to see. Use of the V-chip declines as the children grow older.

### ***Restricted and mature entertainment***

- By Grade 6, half of all kids surveyed have seen an unsuitable movie, video or DVD. In Grades 7 and 8, that figure rises to more than 75 percent.
- The numbers of children who report seeing R-rated movies in theatres across the country varies widely, likely because movie ratings are a provincial matter. The proportion of Grade 7 to 10 kids who have seen restricted movies in a theatre ranges from 24 percent in Quebec to 44 percent in Ontario to 57 percent in BC. This is one of a very few instances in this survey where large geographic differences occur.
- In Grade 7, 76 percent of students have watched restricted movies on video in their home. In Grade 7, about one-quarter of children have personally rented an R-rated video. Many of the R-rated movies that children watch are, apparently, already in the home or have been rented by older siblings, friends or parents.
- Both in theatres and in the home setting, parental supervision leads to markedly less viewing of restricted material.
- Kids do not automatically assume that an “unsuitable” rating means that their parents would disapprove of the movie or game. When asked, “What would your parents say if you watched an unsuitable movie?”, two-thirds of respondents say that it would depend what the movie was. Just over half stated that their parents would respond to the use of M-rated computer games on an individual basis.
- Boys are more likely to have used both unsuitable movies and unsuitable computer games. Boys whose parents take no part in indicating what games they can or cannot play are in the majority. Eighty-four percent of Grade 7 boys have played video and computer games with a mature rating (suitable for 17 years of age or older.)

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- The young people surveyed believe that there should be tighter age restrictions on Mature- rated computer and video games than on R-rated movies.
- About 75 percent of students say R-movies should be open to kids ages 12 and up, but only 50 percent say the same about M-rated games. Thirty percent say that there should be no age restrictions whatsoever for films. On the other hand, only 17 percent favour no age limit on M-rated games.

### FEEL-GOOD AND FRIGHTENING TV PROGRAMS AND MOVIES

- The primary qualities of feel-good shows seem to be heroism and overcoming odds. The girls' choices tend to the romantic, while boys' choices emphasize adventure. The *Harry Potter* series and *The Lord of the Rings* movies appear in both the feel-good and frightening lists.
- There is greater consensus on frightening movies than on feel-good movies. Just two titles (*The Ring/Le cercle* and *Signs*) account for 29 percent of all the frightening choices, while it takes 15 feel-good titles to reach this mark.
- Boys admit to less fear, and both girls and boys appear less fearful as they grow older. However, some kids are greatly moved by violent material. Ten percent "strongly agree" that violent material sometimes gives them nightmares; 10 percent "strongly agree" that violent material sometimes makes them afraid, and 14 percent "strongly disagree" with the idea that violent material does not bother them at all.
- Feel-good choices tend to be recent (two-thirds were seen within the past month), while disturbing experiences tend to be remembered longer. For boys, the frightening memories can remain longer than for girls. Thirty-seven percent of boys recalled scary titles from longer than one year in the past, compared to 26 percent of girls.

#### ***Imitative violence***

- Fifty-one percent of kids in Grades 7 to 10 stated that they had witnessed imitation of some "violent act" from a movie or TV show. ("Violent acts" can include imitating a dangerous stunt. It does not necessarily mean aggressive violence directed against another person.)

#### ***Television programs that kids should not watch***

- Kids were asked to name any television program that kids a few years younger than them should not watch. *The Simpsons* and *South Park* top every list.

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### *Kids' views on media*

The survey asked kids whether they think that violence in the media has any effect on their everyday lives. Results indicate that, left to their own devices, kids tend to regard media violence as benign. But various environmental influences can make kids sensitive to the potential effects of media violence. Those who are more aware

- spend more time doing homework, reading and participating in lessons, clubs and hobbies
- discuss what they watch on TV with their families
- discuss violence, racism and sexism with their families
- have parents who supervise their television viewing.

Opinions about toward media violence are very similar in grades 7 through 10 – attitudes that one has developed by Grade 7 last at least until Grade 10. By contrast, response to other dimensions measured in this survey shows great change over this four-year period.