

Researchers Find Gender Differences in Kid's Video Use

Dr. Robert Kubey

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Young boys feel substantially better emotionally than do young girls when playing video games, watching music videos and otherwise using what experts call "the new video media," according to researchers.

"Although boys feel much better than average while engaged in the new video media, the mood of girls is significantly worse than average while doing so," said Dr. Robert Kubey, an assistant professor of communication at Rutgers and co-author of the study with Reed Larson from the University of Illinois.

"The only exception was in watching movies on videocassette, where the experience of girls was still less positive than boys, but not nearly as negative as with video games and music videos," Kubey said.

Their study of 483 young people between the ages of 9 and 15 also showed that while girls did not enjoy video games and were not as involved with them, boys found such games to be the most psychologically arousing medium and the one on which they concentrated most intensely.

To collect the data, the research subjects carried electronic pagers and a small booklet of self-report forms for one week, filling out reports on their activities and psychological states when signaled at random times by the pagers.

The differences in responses between boys and girls stem from three primary, interconnected explanations, according to the researchers. Boys and girls are socialized in substantially different ways, they said, and oriented to engage in different activities; much of the content in video media is deliberately targeted to boys; and innate biological differences underlying some of the media preferences of males and females cannot be ruled out.

"Research involving music videos was particularly striking," Kubey said. "Girls reported feeling better than boys during popular music unaccompanied by pictures. We believe that it is the imagery itself in music videos that results in the different reactions of boys and girls.

"Music videos present a great deal of violent and sexual imagery and are male-oriented and in harmony with male interests," he said. "They also frequently present women as sex objects and in states of undress and are thus likely to seem particularly threatening to girls who are just coming to terms with their own sexuality."

Many of the movies available on videocassette and marketed to teens are "thick with violence and sexual content, much of which is designed to appeal directly to boys," Kubey said. With regard to video games, Kubey said that boys tend to be much more interested than girls in electronics, computers and technology in general. "Video games also reward a penchant for control, competition and destruction," he said. "Certainly in the United States, boys are socialized in these directions more than girls, who are still socialized toward more nurturing roles and oriented to social network maintenance, or 'kin-keeping.'"

The researchers found that traditional television viewing, without the aid of a videocassette recorder, was by far the dominant media activity in this age group, with reading placing second. Reading accounted for one-eighth as much total time as television.

Robert Kubey has long been a champion for critical viewing across the curriculum beginning in early childhood. In a presentation to Children's Television Workshop last year he said, "...traditional broadcast television can itself teach...viewers how to make television viewing a more complex and rewarding activity by providing formal instruction in television literacy...This can be done by using television to teach young viewers to be aware of the "grammar" and "syntax" of TV and cinema, to understand how television messages (or messages generally for that matter) communicate and persuade, to recognize foreshadowing and symbolism, to understand how programs are written and produced and how economics, time and other pressures shape so much of what we see in the medium...there is research showing that television literacy curricula can improve children's viewing skills."

The Use and Experience of the New Video Media Among Children and Young Adolescents by Robert W. Kubey and Reed Larson is printed in its entirety in *Communication Research*, Volume 17, February 1990, pp. 107-130. Also see Kubey, R. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. *Television and the Quality of Life: How Viewing Shapes Everyday Experience*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1990. Excerpt printed in Summer 1990 issue of *Strategies Quarterly*.

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