



Through an empirical study carried out by Nathanson and Rasmussen from Ohio State University (USA), reading has been demonstrated to be the most enriching activity for the mother-toddler relationship. Playing with the child (under 3 years old) ranked as the immediate runner up.

Watching TV together, on the other hand, impoverishes the communication between mother and child: "TV Viewing Compared to Book Reading and Toy Playing Reduces Responsive Maternal Communication with Toddlers and Preschoolers", in *Human Communication Research* 37 (2011), pp. 465-487.

Up until now, many studies have demonstrated the negative effects (on the cognitive, educational, social, and even physical level) of excessive television exposure for children. Naturally, there are other studies that, on the contrary, reveal the positive effects from educational programs. In the recent years, some studies have begun to analyze the effects of other forms of entertainment, such as playing with toys or reading books, almost always demonstrating positive effects of each activity. The study reported herein is the first to confront these three types of entertainment, in terms of communicative interaction with the purpose of learning, which happens precisely when mother and child share the activities together.

The indicators of the experiment that measure maternal responsiveness were: the affirmation that approves the actions of the child and encourages him to continue what he is doing; imitation of the child's expressions that assures him in his use of language; description of the objects, activities, or events that increase the knowledge of the child; the questions that lead him to provide answers, thus building a simple "dialogue"; and lastly, the mother's contingent responses to the expressive manifestations of the child that encourage or discourage him to continue the shared activity. For example, a mother's silence in response to a comment, to a change of subject, or to a verbal

expression of the child before the scene of a television show would be considered an inappropriate response because it discourages communication between them.

One would expect, at least intuitively, a greater degree of interaction, and therefore a better communication, between mother and child when they play together. **However, the study demonstrated that the highest degree of interaction is verified in the activity of reading a children's age-appropriate book together. It was already known, and has been confirmed by empirical studies, that reading favors the acquisition of more complex vocabulary, grammatical structures, and syntax in the everyday life of children.** The novelty of the Nathanson and Rasmussen's study lies in their demonstration that shared reading of a book elicits a greater maternal responsiveness and reduces the gaps in communication with the child. In other words, reading does not isolate those who are reading together, unlike what occurs with television.

To what extent does the responsiveness of the mother not depend on the child's "linguistic competence", rather on the activity in itself (whether reading, playing or watching TV together)? One may suppose that the smaller the child's expressive capacity is, the more difficult it will be for the mother to "maintain the train of thought"; in other words, the mother's "maternal responsiveness" will be decreased. The authors, however, in analyzing the variable of the "linguistic competence" of the child, conducted a test of the influence of this factor. It is not an important factor: the linguistic competence of the child influences communication only in some cases, and in different ways according to age.

### About the Method

The study was conducted in the laboratory and with all the usual guarantees on the sociological level to ensure reliability of the results. These measures included careful choosing of the 73 mother-child pairs, who were filmed and not advised on the purpose of the study, accurately coding the filmed records, and selecting the indicators of "maternal response" through the statistical studies. Moreover, the statistical treatment of the relationship between the studied variables and the results was excellent. The only problematic aspect, noted by the authors themselves, was that the "artificial" conditions specific to the experiment, insofar as their ability to elicit spontaneous behavior in the subjects analyzed, may provoke a positive oriented response.

The results of the study, a pioneer in its field, should encourage family educators, especially parents, to reflect upon and limit the use of television as a form of shared entertainment; and, to find other richer ways of communication between parent and child, like reading and playing together. Unfortunately, studies that measure the potential impact of video games in this relationship do not yet exist, perhaps due to their novelty or the generational gap.