CHILDREN IN JAPAN AND MULTIMEDIA

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Abstract: Many parents in Japan today are very concerned and have daily problems with their children over the following kind of issues concerning video games, multimedia, and similar devices.

1) Is children's enthusiasm for video games actually harming their growth (physicially or mentally)?

2) Is there any way that video games can help children in the future? For example, will playing these games help children learn to use computers or develop their power of thought?

3) Will excessive enthusiasm for TV games undermine our basic lifestyle? Is the time they spend studying at home or playing outside actually decreasing?

4) Will the methods of communication brought about by computers, pagers, and cellular phones weaken human relations among children?

5) Will being immersed in a virtual world created by computers result in a diminished sense of reality?

The causes of this uneasiness may be traced to parents' own anxieties and concerns about the exceedingly rapid growth of the "information society" of today, together with the fact that their children are directly caught up in the deluge of this information and multimedia society. The development of media has coincided with the growth of today's adults, but children are immersed in a media-filled environment from the day they are born. In Japan, there are now children who can play video games before even learning to write. No one can predict what kind of adults these children will grow to be in the future, and it is fair to say that the most parents and children in Japan are being tossed about on the waves of this information explosion. At this international symposium, we hope to hear the many views that are held around the world concerning children and multimedia.

In my report today I shall attempt to clarify the relation between children and the media, based on the recent results of surverys conducted by the Benesse Educational Research Institute. These surveys deal with the actual situation of children and multimedia from many perspectives, including the children's multimedia experience as well as communication with parents.

Chaotic Aspect of the Information Era

As the correlation between science technology and the development of society has progressed, we have entered a chaotic era in which advanced information technology has created highly intricate effects on our life.

In the realm of science technology, industrial products such as automobiles and electrical appliances seem to have fully developed, although the improvement of design and function still continues, while the media, (such as

computers) continue to develop. This technological advancement of media is so rapid and creates such drastic changes in the nature of life and environment that we are almost overwhelmed by the deluge of his information and multimedia society.

The multimedia situation has become complex because different media are available simultaneously, ranging from printed products, the internet and handy phones to mobile phones.

This indicates that we live in an affluent multimedia society. However, from a different point of view, this overwhelming presence of the media leads to a society
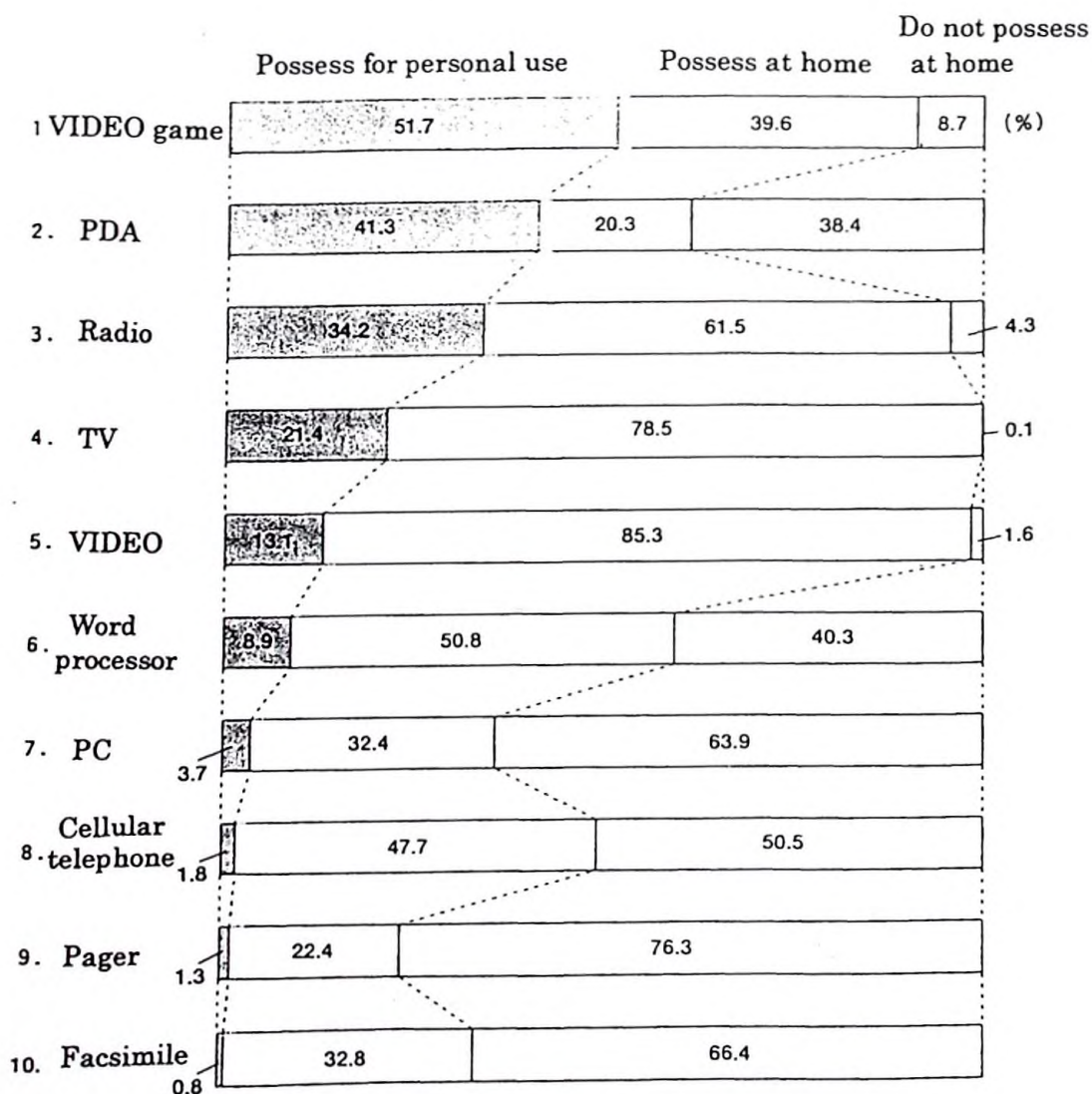

.Fig. 1: Use of Multimedia.

in disorder, where people are being tossed about on the waves of the information explosion.

For example, we often come acrros the following scene in the train: a person is using a handy phone as a communication tool, while the next person looks disturbed as she is reading a book. There are also other passengers who think this behavior is a public nuisance. This scene in the train symbolizes Japanese society today.

The diversity of these media and their penetration undermine each person's lifestyle and the difference in values among the various generations. A generation ago, the experience and involvement in historical events or social changes (e.g. wars) formed the identity of each generation and these events helped to distinguish the generations. Today, the experience of different media, TV programs or music forms each lifestyle and the identity of each generation. Currently in Japan, evaluation of the development of the media and responses to it are diverse and not consistent, which makes judgement of the media more complicated.

Regarding the reaction and interaction with new media, a huge gap exists between adults and children. This new gap is manifested in the various disciplinary problems which are surfacing in the home and at school.

Children's Adaptation to New Media versus the Anxiety-ridden Adults

Benesse Corporation conducted a survey on the "Children's Multimedia Experience" with the cooperation of Professor Takeshi Tamura, Assistant
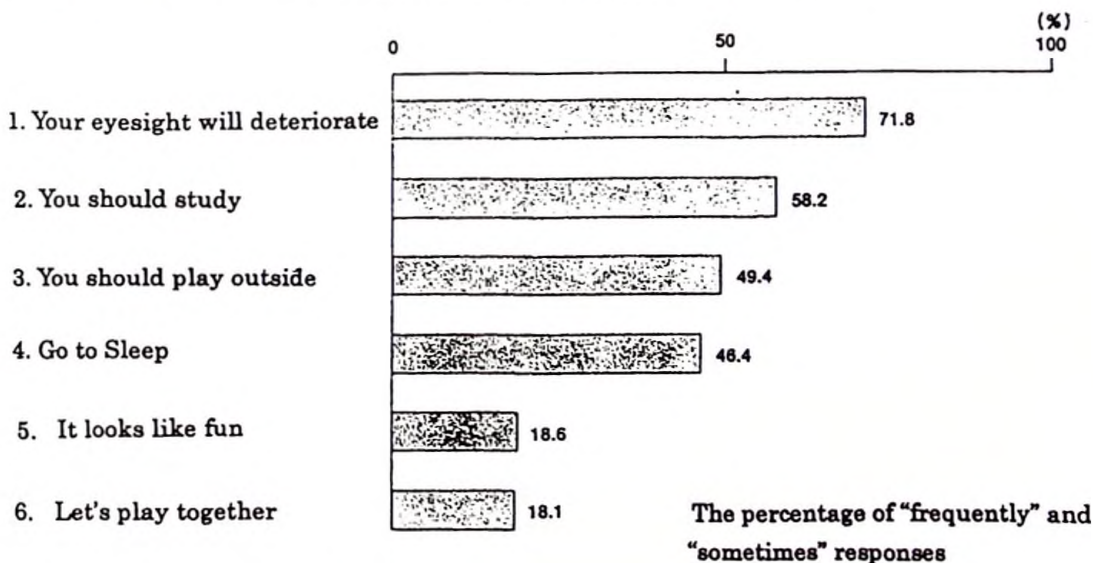

1. Your eyesight will deteriorate — 71.8
2. You should study — 58.2
3. You should play outside — 49.4
4. Go to Sleep — 46.4
5. It looks like fun — 18.6
6. Let's play together — 18.1

The percentage of "frequently" and "sometimes" responses

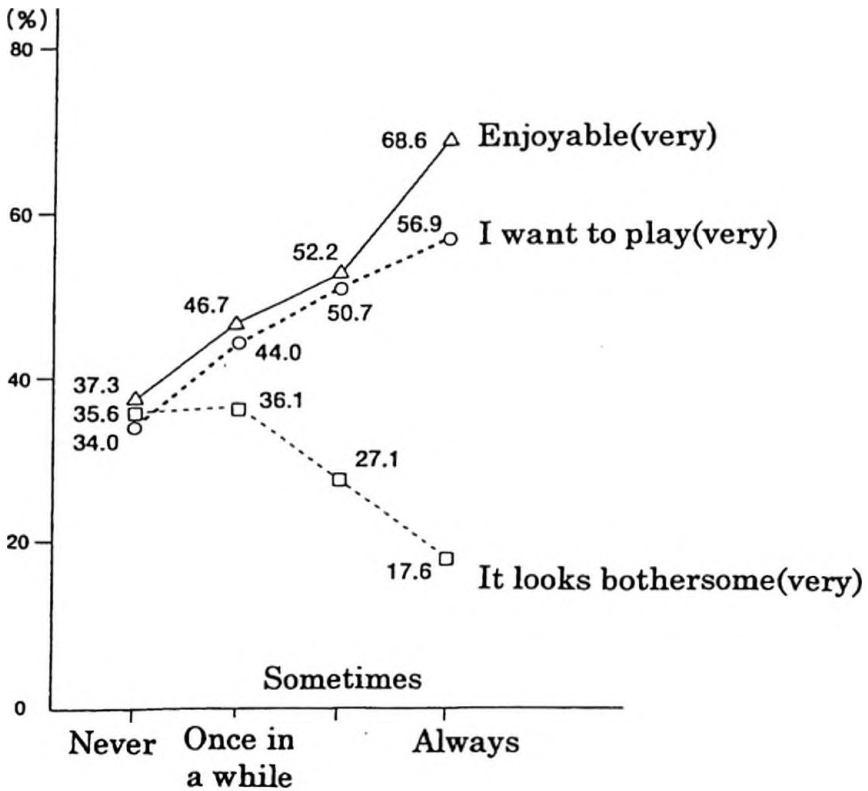Fig. 2: Pavents' Comments While You Play Video Game.

Fig. 3: Studying with Computers.

Professor at Tokyo Gakugei University in March 1997. The sample consisted of fifth and sixth graders in the Kanto area (Tokyo, Kanagawa Pref. Saitama Pref., and Chiba Pref.). We received responses from 2,514 children. I would like to share the following data with you.

Figure 1 shows what kind of media equipment children possess. From this figure, we find that about half the children have their own video games. Among the children who answered they have video games at home, more than 90% of children has video games at hand. 35% the of children answered that they had personal computers at home.

Figure 2 shows that parents tell children when they play video games. 72% of children are told, "You will get poor eyesight". 60% are told, "Study instead of playing video games", and 50% are told, "Play outside instead of video games".

This result tells us that most Japanese children use new media such as video games. Parents feel uneasy and complain that children devote too much time to those games. Strangely enough, it is the parents who bought the video games for the children, as they do not necessarily have strong beliefs about prohibiting

children from playing video games. In many Japanese families, trivial disputes over electronic media like video games are going on every day.

Figure 3 shows the correlation between the frequency of children using personal computers and their perception of computers. We can see that the more frequently they use computers at school, the more they feel it is enjoyable.

While many children enjoy learning with computers at school, most schools in Japan are not fully prepared for classes with computers. Although equipped with computers, they are mostly unused and covered with dust. The reasons for this may vary but mainly focus on the following.

Firstly there is a dissonance between the school evaluation system and the pleasure children experience learning with computers. In Japan both children and parents are exceedingly concerned with examination results and school performance, which tend to be based on printed materials. This may mean that working with computers, although enjoyable, may not necessarily contribute to enhancing school performance.

In addition, there are still many teachers who doubt the educational effects of incorporating computers into the curriculum and are even "allergic" to computer use.

As described above, there is a large difference between children and adults in the interactions with new media at home or school, whether for studying or playing.

Importance of Balancing Media and Self-control

Pagers and handy phones, which have become popular among youth recently, are other examples indicating the difference in adaptability to media between adults and children. It should also be pointed out that the game software industry for children has grown to the one of the most profitable businesses in Japan.

There is no doubt that children adapt to new media with impressive ease and do not hesitate to tackle them. However we need to assess whether these new media are of positive effects when considering the growth of children. Adults design these media for children's pleasure, and manufacturers mostly aim for high profits regardless of the effects on children. The kind of influence these new media have exerted on children has not yet been determined.

Even if we can make use of visual images, computers and simulation for educational purposes, human thought mainly depends on the power of abstract thinking and articulating symbols (languages). Thus there are some people who doubt whether visual images or simulations can improve those faculties.

Consequently, I suppose that the convenience of the media could impair the power to think in some respects, just as frequent automobile use weaken the leg muscles. Another example is that if you only rely on computers or an electronic organizer for scheduling, you will panic if it is broken.

In order for humans to live in modern society, it is absolutely necessary to be able to walk or run, not only ride in comfortable cars (in advanced nations, people jog for the sake of their health). It is the same will the media; much consideration should be given to choosing what kinds of media and how often one should use them.

One of the educational goals of the 21st century is to teach children how they should balance their desires and self-control in using the media.