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Daniel Tiger vs. Ms. Rachel: exploring video-based media with babies and toddlers

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Abstract

Introduction. Using video-based media (VBM)—television, movies, YouTube videos, etc—with children under age two remains a debated issue. While child development experts warn against it, some parents continue to use it with their babies and toddlers. This research endeavoured to provide initial insight into the usage of VBM with babies and toddlers, including why and how parents are using it and characteristics of the media being used.

Method. Qualitative data from two separate studies were collected through interviews, focus groups, and a daily texting protocol with twenty-two parents of young children, ages 0–30 months.

Analysis. A thematic approach was used to analyse the interview, focus group, and texting data. Both inductive and deductive approaches were used in coding the data.

Results. The research found that parents are using VBM with their babies and toddlers for a variety of reasons. They are mostly using child-focused media, comprising TV shows, movies, and YouTube videos, with over half of it consisting of low-stimulation media.

Conclusion. These initial findings provide a foundation and point to the need for more in-depth and expanded research that explores the role and impact of VBM, and particularly low-stimulation media (LSM), in babies' and toddlers' daily lives.

Introduction

Video-based media (VBM) usage with children under two has long been a controversial topic. For children under the age of two, the American Association of Paediatrics (AAP) recommends that *'media use should be very limited and only when an adult is standing by to co-view, talk, and teach'* (AAP, 2022). For 18- to 24-month-old children, they recommend high quality-media on a very limited basis with joint media use (AAP, 2022). In addition, there is still relatively sparse evidence on the educational benefits in using VBM with children under two years of age. A review of the limited research that exists points to how some research has demonstrated benefits from VBM when parents actively engage with their child around it, while other research has found no benefit for children under two or even negative impacts to their vocabulary (Kucirkova & Radesky, 2017) and brain development and executive functioning (Law et al., 2023).

At the same time, some parents continue to use VBM with their babies and toddlers (Mannell et al., 2024; No-Entertainer-8279, 2023), likely because it can be challenging to parent a baby/toddler (Staples & Bates, 2018). Parents who need a break or have to do something quickly may see VBM as a valid option for engaging and occupying their child (Lammers et al., 2022). Therefore, we need a better understanding of this VBM usage with babies and toddlers, as it could help parenting and child development experts recommend more effective methods for parents to engage their very young child with VBM along with other types of media. In addition, understanding more about parents' role in very young children's media usage can help determine how to build parents' media literacy around using VBM so that they can serve as effective media role models and facilitators for their very young children (Herdzina & Lauricella, 2020). Having a better understanding of babies and toddlers' VBM usage could also help media designers determine how to design video- and audio-based media for more effective and beneficial use with very young children. This study aims to help build an understanding of VBM usage by providing exploratory findings around how parents in two cities in the United States are using VBM with their babies and toddlers and some different facets of the media they are using. These findings offer a foundation for future research on the role and impact of VBM in babies and toddlers' daily lives.

Literature review

Limited research has explored the use of VBM with babies and toddlers. A few studies found that parents are using VBM with their babies and toddlers (Mannell et al., 2024; Lammers et al., 2022). Additional research reported potential benefits for children associated with this use, including increased language development, particularly with an engaged adult co-viewer (Kucirkova & Radesky, 2017), along with potential risks such as sleep issues (Ribner et al., 2019), attention problems (Tamana et al., 2019), and cognitive development delays (Madigan et al., 2019). Given the emergent state of this research, it is not clear whether these benefits and risks stem solely from using media with young children or if they may be due to characteristics of the media and/or how it is being used. Regardless of the relative lack of research in the area, it is clear that parents play a crucial role with how beneficial VBM is for their babies and toddlers, from the ways they facilitate the usage to the quality of the media they select (Herdzina & Lauricella, 2020). The established concept of joint media engagement supports the importance of this role and highlights the benefits of adults actively sharing and interacting with their children around television and other media that they consume together (Takeuchi & Stevens, 2011). JME can include a range of media sources (TV, iPad) and locations (home and on the go) in these beneficial media interactions.

One aspect of using VBM with very young children that has emerged on social media is low-stimulation media (LSM). LSM is defined as media that *'emphasizes educational and emotionally-appropriate content while minimizing highly energized or loud dialogue, noises, and colours'* (Gordon, 2024). Some of the LSM criteria include a more muted colour scheme, softer sounds, simple plots, and slower-paced scene changes (Wisener, 2025, Flaherty, 2025). This idea of LSM

has become popular with individuals, child development experts, and organizations who have used articles, blog posts, and videos to share about the benefits and examples of LSM (Braun-Silva, 2025; Gordon, 2024). These benefits may include educational learning, both intellectual and emotional; better sleep; less stress; increased focus; and more (Flaherty, 2025; Gordon, 2024). However, research is needed that explores LSM use and its actual benefits, if any, for young children. This study aims to help fill this gap with initial findings around parental use of VBM with very young children, using JME as a theoretical lens, and the characteristics of the media they are using, including the prevalence of LSM in their child's media usage.

Methods

This research was guided by the following research questions:

1. How and why are parents using VBM with babies and toddlers?
2. What types of VBM are caregivers using with their babies and toddlers?
 - a. What are some common characteristics of this VBM?
 - b. To what extent is low-stimulation content present in this VBM usage?

The data used in this study comes from two recent, separate projects. Study 1 used an experience sampling methodology—consisting of regular texting prompts, interviews, and surveys—with parents of babies and toddlers to understand the literacy environments of families with babies and toddlers. Study 2 used focus groups and interviews with parents of babies and toddlers to understand how different care organizations can better support them. Both studies used purposive sampling, intentionally recruiting parents of babies and toddlers in environments where they spend time. While these studies were focused on other topics, during the studies' activities several parents spontaneously discussed different ways they use VBM with their babies and toddlers, which led us to use this combined dataset as a pilot study for upcoming work.

Participants

Study 1 included twelve parents who had children ages three months to thirty months of age, with an average age of fifteen months. These parents were mostly middle-class and living in a large urban East Coast city. Nine of these parents mentioned using VBM at different times with their babies and toddlers. Study 2 included forty parents of children, ages 0-24 months. These parents were a mix of middle, working, and lower class, and all living in a smaller urban Midwestern city. Thirteen of these parents discussed using VBM with their babies and toddlers. For this study, we only used data from the participants in both studies who discussed using VBM with their children, which resulted in 22 total participants across the two studies.

Data collection

The data was collected during regular texting prompts, interviews, and focus groups. For study 1, regular texting prompts were sent to parents across three rounds. Each round included responding to the text prompts twice a day, five days a week, for three weeks, across a three-month period. The parents also participated in an interview at the beginning before starting the texting process and then at the end of each round. The text responses were transferred into a spreadsheet and organized by round, week, day, and time of day. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. For study 2, parents participated in focus groups or interviews depending on their schedule. The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. In both studies, parents were not specifically asked about VBM use with their children. Instead, their unsolicited responses emerged during questions about what parenting has been like for them, their daily schedule with their child, the interactions they have with their child during their daily schedule, print media their child enjoys, and interactions with other family members.

Data analysis

We analysed the data to reveal facets of the VBM media usage and of the VBM media itself. To code the different reasons parents were using VBM with their babies and toddlers, one researcher went through the data from both studies and developed thematic codes (See Table 1). The codes were shared, reviewed, and discussed with another researcher in rounds of consensus coding, resulting in revisions to the thematic codes and their final application. The data were also coded as active or passive to illuminate how the children were engaging with the VBM based on their parents' description. Active engagement was applied where children were having verbal or physical interactions around the media, such as dancing, singing, and clapping along, or having conversations with others about it. Passive engagement was applied where parents described their young children as just '*watching TV [or movies or videos]*' or where they talked about '*putting on*' a show/movie/video for their children.

We also analysed aspects of the VBM media to understand common characteristics of the media that parents were using with their babies and toddlers. To begin this process, we created a list of the specific media mentioned in the data and noted repetitive mentions. Then each show was coded as TV, movie, or YouTube video. We also coded if the media was child-focused or non-child-focused. Child-focused media was designed for or targeted towards a child audience. Everything that was not coded as child-focused was considered non-child-focused media. Since we recognized many of the media as dated, we also decided to code for the age of the media, which we did by capturing the debut year of each specific media. Finally, we identified which specific media could be classified as LSM and which could not. This was done by referencing several lists of LSM for young children for the specific titles identified in the data (Flaherty, 2025; Gordon, 2024; Wisener, 2025). If a specific title was not on the lists or if there was disagreement about a title among the lists, then the lower stimulation criteria—more muted colour scheme, softer sounds, simple plots, and slower-paced scene changes—were used to determine their classification.

Results

Overall, the texting, interview, and focus group data revealed that there were 85 instances where the 22 parents discussed using VBM with their babies or toddlers. In a large majority of the instances, the parents described their children engaging with the VBM in a passive way, but some also reported their children engaging with it in a more active manner. There were a variety of reasons that parents discussed using VBM with their young children (Table 1). Out of the instances where parents specified a reason for the VBM usage, bonding or for educational/developmental benefits were common responses; however, parents also discussed using it as a distraction for when they themselves needed to do something or for when their child needed to be distracted from their current experience or setting. One parent shared,

This was his third trip on an airplane...the biggest thing is that he kicks the seat in front of him. His two other flights, we didn't let him on my phone at all, but this time, I had downloaded a couple of videos that I knew he would watch. If he was getting antsy or was kicking the seat, I would just put that on for him.

Some tensions emerged in the ways the parents discussed their child's VBM usage. While some parents shared that their babies and toddlers would watch VBM with other family members, such as grandparents, a few of these parents were not always okay with it. One parent commented, '*I try to keep her away from the TV because...[her grandfather] lets her watch a little bit more TV than I would prefer. My in-laws [also] let her watch more TV than I would prefer.*' Parents also acknowledged being okay with their child watching VBM but wanting to help them develop healthy boundaries or self-regulation around media consumption, such as one parent who commented,

I did try to have him watch Reading Rainbow, just so he can get accustomed to [TV], but I really don't want my child to watch a lot of those shows because...some kids, they get really hostile about their shows. They don't want to do anything but watch.

VBM usage code	Code description
As a distraction	When the parent felt the child needed a distraction for a specific reason (i.e. when parent(s) needed to do something, sickness in the family, during inclement weather or travel, etc.)
As a part of child's daily routine	When a parent indicated the VBM was a part of their child's regular daily schedule
Bonding experience	When VBM was used to spend time with a child or share interests with them
For educational or developmental benefit	When a parent uses VBM with their child to benefit their development or learning
No use specified	Where a parent did not specify how or why they were using VBM with their young child

Table 1. The ways in which parents are using VBM with their babies/toddlers

The VBM that parents described using with their babies and toddlers shared a few common characteristics. Most parents mentioned that their babies and toddlers watched TV, but some also discussed using movies and YouTube videos with their children. A majority of the parents' responses included names of the specific VBM content that were being used. A large majority of the content was child-focused VBM, but they also discussed using some non-child-focused VBM, such as football or soccer games and music/concert videos. Within the mentions of specific child-focused VBM content, there were 28 distinct shows/movies, with multiple participants mentioning Ms. Rachel, *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*, *Blippi*, *Gabby's Dollhouse*, and *Cocomelon*.

Examining the specific child-focused VBM identified by the parents, a little over half of it met the criteria of low-stimulation. The rest were not necessarily high-stimulation media; they just did not fit all of the criteria for LSM. Another interesting characteristic from the data was the age of the media. Many of the shows/movies were older, with an overall average debut year of 2005, and a large majority of the media were over 10 years old. This suggests some aspect of nostalgia, with parents wanting their children to watch what they watched when they were little. One parent shared, 'I want him to watch shows, but I like the shows that my mom and my family had us grow up on, like *Reading Rainbow*, *Magic School Bus*, stuff that's educational.' Parents may also feel that many of the older shows were less stimulating and, therefore, are better for their children. In fact, the average age of the VBM coded as low-stimulation was 2002, compared to the other non-low-stimulation VBM which was 2009, which suggests that perhaps older media is better aligned with the low stimulation criteria than newer media.

Discussion

The data demonstrate that parents across different economic levels are using VBM with their very young children in a variety of ways. Of the specified uses, many parents seem to be using VBM to support healthy child development practices and educational or bonding interactions. This suggests that parents are using it in an intentional way. Media, and particularly VBM, is pervasive in our lives (Davis, 2023; Sobel, 2019), so encouraging intentional usage rather than no usage is likely more realistic for parents (Konca & Tantekin Erden, 2021). Focusing on media literacy efforts for parents of babies and toddlers may also help to increase and refine the ways they use media with their very young children (Herdzina & Lauricella, 2020), potentially converting some of the passive solo-and co-viewing that was present in the data to more interactive engagement in line with JME practices (Ewin et al., 2021). Future research can explore the impact of these JME practices on very young children's learning and development.

The data also indicate that parents are being more intentional around the types of media that their babies and toddlers consume. This is important because it suggests that parents want their children to be exposed to media that is developmentally appropriate and potentially educational for them. Furthermore, the presence of LSM in the data demonstrates that parents may recognize the nuances that exist in choosing media for their babies and toddlers. Media literacy efforts should also focus on helping parents understand criteria they can use to evaluate VBM and identify high-quality media that is appropriate for their babies and toddlers (Herdzina & Lauricella, 2020). Media creators should also consider that having educational and child-focused media is not enough for these parents; instead, they want media specifically designed to be suitable for very young children.

Limitations

There are several limitations that need to be acknowledged with these findings. This study's data come from a relatively small sample of parents from urban areas in two states. As such, it is potentially not fully representative of parents' experiences across the United States. In addition, because the studies from which these data emerged were not focused on usage of VBM with babies and toddlers, it is likely that important aspects of VBM usage with babies and toddlers were not fully covered in the data.

Conclusion

The findings detailed here provide valuable insight into parents' usage of VBM with their babies and toddlers, particularly around the role of LSM in their VBM usage. Because these findings reiterate that parents are using media with babies and toddlers, regardless of the current guidance, future research is needed to explore the impact of LSM with babies and toddlers to determine affordances and challenges, along with any potential alignment regarding the risks determined by previous research into very young children's media usage. Furthermore, given this VBM usage with babies and toddlers, media literacy efforts need to be developed and studied to understand how to effectively emphasize and infuse JME practices into parents' VBM usage with their babies and toddlers.

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