

The plug



e Plug-In Drug 25th Anniversary Edition Synopsis How does the passive act of watching television and other electronic media — regardless of their content — affect a developing child's relationship to the real world? Focusing on this crucial question, Marie Winn takes a compelling look at television's impact on children and the family.

Winn's classic study has been extensively updated to address the new media landscape, including new sections on: computers, video games, the VCR, the V-Chip and other control devices, TV for babies, television and physical health. Winn shows examples of how parents lose control of their children's TV watching. The book's major purpose is to help families regain control of this powerful medium. "Declining SATs" and "The Good-Enough Family" Two excerpts from the 25th Anniversary Edition Mystery of the Declining SATs There is an old, unsolved mystery involving scores on the SATs, those tests of verbal and mathematical abilities that high school students must take to be accepted into most colleges. In the mid 1960s™ the average scores on the verbal part of the SATs began an almost 20 year decline. In a range from 200 to 800 points, the average scores went from 478 in 1964 to 424 in 1980??" a drop of 54 points.

At the beginning of the 1980s™ the scores began to level off, and have stayed within five points of 424 to this day. What brought about this troubling decline? Why did it begin just when it did? People have been trying to find the answer to these questions for years. Yet no one seems to have pursued a related question that may offer a clue to the mystery: What caused the decline to end around 1980, with no significant decreases or increases after that? Juxtaposing the SAT scores of high school students

during the last 40 or so years with some statistics about TV ownership and viewing times during those years, may help to answer all three of these questions. In 1977, when the scores had almost reached their nadir, a panel commissioned by the College Board concluded that a major factor for the lower scores was the greater diversity of students taking the test ??“ more minority students, some of them not native speakers of English, were now striving to get into college.] Yet the great increase in minority test-takers cannot be the explanation: the verbal scores of white, middle-class, native-speaking students had declined along with everyone else??™s scores. Various other explanations have been offered for the decline.

A Cornell sociologist blamed it on the dumbing down of text books. He showed that latter-day sixth-grade texts are on the same level of difficulty as 4th grade McGuffey readers were in 1896 and pointed out that the decline began when the first wave of Baby Boomers, who had used those simplified text books, sat down at the SAT test tables. But he didn??™t explain why the decline suddenly ended around 1980, though the same texts remained in the classrooms. Others have suggested less effective teaching in the schools. Yet that wouldn??™t explain why the decline has been greater in verbal skills than in math skills. And even if it turned out that only reading and language arts teaching had fallen off, while good teaching, for some reason, had managed to prevail for math, it still would not explain why the decline leveled out after a number of years.

How about television??™s arrival in American homes as a primary cause The timing is right. The first generation of children who had watched television during a significant part of their childhood, sat down to take its first college

boards during the mid-1960s, just as the decline began. The fact that the verbal scores went down far more than the math scores lends support to the theory that TV was a causal factor. As Chapter 7 argues, extensive television viewing affects young children's verbal development more than the development of their visual or spatial abilities. And as the previous section indicates, numerous studies have shown a strong negative association between television viewing and school performance. Reading achievement seems especially vulnerable to the effects of excessive television viewing and reading, it is universally acknowledged, is the key to academic success. If indeed television viewing adversely affects children's verbal abilities, then one may begin to explain the steady decline of verbal SAT scores starting in the mid-sixties by the steady increase in television ownership year after year from 1950 on. In 1950 fewer than 8% of American families owned TV sets.

By 1954 more than half had televisions. By 1957, 78% of families were set owners, and by 1964, almost everyone — 92% of families had become TV viewers. The saturation point had just about been reached, though set ownership would slowly inch up another 4% during the next 20 years. The mid-sixties, when the decline in scores began, was when the first children who had spent their formative years watching TV — those who were about three in 1950 — turned 16 or 17 and took the test.

Every year through the sixties and seventies, thanks to the increase in set ownership, a larger cohort of TV watchers took their SATs, and every year, the scores went down, down, down: from 478 in 1964 to 471 in 1966 to 460 in 1970 to 445 in 1973 to 434 in 1975 to 429 in 1978 and finally to 424 in

1980. That??™s when the scores stopped going down. Why At least partly because the saturation point had been reached around 1964. So sixteen years later the scores bottomed out.

They have stayed at about the same level ever since. Set ownership is not the only factor. More important is the amount of time spent watching.

Another explanation for the steady, two-decade-long decline lies in the steady increase in children??™s viewing time from 1950 through the 1970??™s. The students who scored 478 in 1964 had watched 0 hours during their formative years, having been born in ??? 47 or ??™ 48, before TV became a mass medium. They probably didn??™t acquire a time-consuming TV habit, until they were in high school, with a lot of reading and other verbal experience under their belts by the time they took their SATs. After 1950 children??™s average weekly television-viewing time began to rise, year after year. One study indicates that first- and sixth-graders (the two groups chosen for that particular study) were watching about an hour more television daily in 1970 than in 1959, and that Sunday viewing had increased by more than two and a half hours for the sixth-graders.

8 The rise in viewing time eventually leveled off ??“ after all there wasn??™t that much more time left in the day, after school work, chores, sports and a few other activities that continued to compete with television for childrens time. And the decline leveled off as well. Another suggestive pattern emerges when noting the decrease is characterized by changes in the two extremes??“ fewer high scores and more low scores??“ rather than an across-the-board slippage. Why the decrease in high scores In 1959 the brightest sixth-graders were found to be among the heaviest users of

television while the brightest high school students were found to be lighter viewers and heavier readers than their less gifted classmates.

Anxious parents were reassured that television would have little effect on their children's destinies, since by tenth grade the bright students turned to books just as they had always done. But by 1970 this comforting trend had been reversed. The Surgeon General's report showed that now more of the brighter students in tenth grade were heavy users of television than heavy users of books. Television now reigned supreme in the lives of the group that had once contained the most avid readers—the most gifted students. As these brightest students watched more TV, their college board scores began to decline.

Year after year the number of students scoring in the 600 to 800 range on the Verbal SATs dropped steadily, going from 112, 000 in 1972, to fewer than 72, 000 in 1990, a decrease of more than a third. Why had the scores of those best and brightest test-takers taken a dive? It seems likely that before they succumbed to television, their verbal and analytic abilities had been sharpened and deepened by extensive reading. As more of these students replaced books with TV viewing, their scores decreased dramatically. [Note: A long footnote clarifying changes in the way SAT scores are published today, as well as others giving sources of all statistics in this section are given on pp. 321-322 of the new edition]