

TV watching: beg, plead, order, demand — or 'lock off'?

Graham Garner is the proprietor of a purpose-made architectural joinery business. The Controlock demanded a great deal of investigation, research and development, and the challenge 'has been an education in itself'.

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Graham Garner

“Oh, Dad — this is the best bit!”

I recently filed an electrical device for patent. Initially it wasn't seen as a potentially commercial device, but more of a necessity to stop my wife and myself from going mad.

We are a 'normal, average family unit' — Mum, Dad and two boys now aged 16 and 13. The eldest boy, William, is quite studious and serious about his homework responsibilities, but his brother Thomas has square eyes, and although we begged, pleaded, ordered or demanded that homework be done straight away upon his return from school, would he? No — the television was a magnet that drew him ever closer, it mesmerised him by its very presence. He didn't even have to be in the same room.

We have a video recorder too, but would he video programmes to watch later, after homework? *No!*

I tore my hair out in desperation — I'm quite bald now. How many times have I charged in and switched the television off, to pleas of “Oh, Dad — this is the best bit!”?

All Mums and Dads must know exactly what I mean!

A cunning plan

I had threatened to put a lock on the electricity so many times that I was forced to set to and devise a cunning plan.

I adapted a double socket, and locked off the socket supplying the television, leaving the video operational.

Thomas was terribly upset at first, but thought he could outsmart me. Sneaking behind the television, armed with a double plug adaptor, he withdrew the video plug . . . !

Then my second line of defence came into

action. With this device it is impossible to get a plug back into the 'live' socket once it has been withdrawn. With the other one locked off, he had denied himself both the television and the video, and left the evidence of his tampering for all to see.

I soon realised that the ability of the keyholder to deny electric power has applications and uses that are almost unlimited. Among many other things it is a very useful and desirable safety device, and if it saves the fingers of just one child wanting to play with Dad's electric tools in his workshop or garage, then it's all been worth while.

The Controlock

I have christened it the Controlock. Based upon a double switched socket outlet tested to BS 1363 (patent pending), the fully-insulated and enclosed locking system provides the keyholder with the ability to deny or control the supply of electricity in a new and versatile way.

With the lock in the neutral position, the normal working features of a switched double-socket outlet are not restricted.

One turn of the key through 180 degrees automatically locks both switches off. Plugs can be inserted and reinserted at will, but power is not available to either of the socket outlets.

One turn of the key through 90 degrees to either the left or right automatically locks one of the switches off. The adjacent plug is not affected and may be used normally. If a plug is in position before the lock is activated, power is available to it. However, once this plug is withdrawn, re-insertion is denied, thus rendering the whole double socket outlet unusable. The same

principle will apply should a plug not be in the socket when the lock is activated.

Editorial comment We have been following with interest Graham Garner's progress in developing and marketing this device ever since he responded to the challenge thrown down by his resourceful son! One reason for our association was to share with him the Health Related Behaviour figures for television watching by youngsters.

As he says in his article, all Mums and Dads must know exactly what he means. Among the reasons put forward by parents for feeling uncomfortable at the amount of television their children watch may be included:

*It encourages physical inactivity.
Many programmes are intellectually undemanding.*

The content of some programmes could encourage the development of undesirable beliefs and behaviour.

Television is a distraction from other more 'worthy' activities, such as hobbies, reading or conversation.

Our questionnaire asks how long the young people watched television on the previous evening, but interpretation of the results must take into account the difficulty in determining what is meant by 'watching television'. The television may be on continuously, with occasional periods of concentrated viewing interspersed with brief attention to arresting images or sounds.

However, although the definition of 'watching television' may be different for different people, these variations are submerged when the data from a large number of young people is compared.

One study we recently carried out was to see if the 'natural' assumption that less television is watched in summer was supported by the data. The months were grouped as follows:

Spring: January – April

Summer: May – August

Autumn: September – December

Results for 19,000 young people aged 11–16, surveyed in 1990, do not show the clear summer minimum that might have been expected if they are outside more (Table 1).

Table 2 shows the reported levels of television-watching by boys and girls in different age groups, reproduced from *Young People in 1992*.

We do not record the time when programmes were watched, and so we miss Graham Garner's 'homework priority' dimension. There is, however, evidence from the questionnaire that the amount of time spent on homework is rising, evidently in response to GCSE demands, and therefore the need to prioritise the weekday evening's activities is also greater.

An interesting alternative strategy, an electronic device which fits inside the TV set and rations viewing to a given number of hours per week, has also been brought on to the market recently. According to the inventor it can teach children 'time management, budgeting skills and business ethics' — the latter, presumably, when negotiating time-sharing with siblings.

Table 1. Mean television watching index, after school, by season, during 1990. Index 2 means between 1 and 2 hours' watching; 3 means between 2 and 3 hours. (Sample size approximately 18,000 pupils.)

	Spring	Summer	Autumn	Mean
<i>Boys</i>				
Year 7	2.4	2.1	—	2.37
Year 8	2.6	2.6	2.5	2.56
Year 9	2.7	2.2	2.3	2.66
Year 10	2.5	2.7	2.7	2.56
Year 11	2.1	2.2	—	2.21
<i>Girls</i>				
Year 7	2.5	2.2	—	2.39
Year 8	2.6	2.5	2.5	2.54
Year 9	2.6	2.4	2.6	2.56
Year 10	2.5	2.7	2.6	2.51
Year 11	2.1	—	—	2.08
<i>Overall means</i>				
Boys	2.55	2.51	2.34	2.53
Girls	2.50	2.42	2.40	2.48

Table 2. Television watching after school in 1992 (figures in percentages).

<i>Responses</i>	Year 7 (11–12)		Year 8 (12–13)		Year 9 (13–14)		Year 10 (14–15)	
	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
Not at all	20.6	16.4	12.7	13.3	17.6	10.7	12.3	13.0
Up to 1 hour	28.5	33.8	27.3	28.5	29.7	26.0	24.6	28.9
Up to 2 hours	26.0	25.2	28.6	28.4	25.4	30.4	28.5	28.6
Up to 3 hours	14.1	15.4	17.3	17.8	15.1	19.0	19.1	18.2
Up to 4 hours	6.2	6.8	7.7	7.1	5.9	9.3	9.2	7.1
Up to 5 hours	1.9	1.6	2.9	3.0	3.2	2.6	3.8	2.7
Over 5 hours	2.7	0.8	3.4	1.8	3.0	1.9	2.6	1.5
Sample	369	500	3777	3694	1171	1134	3959	4075