Children and teenagers are multitasking their way through more electronic media daily, juggling iPods and instant messaging with TV and cell phones, and spending more time plugged in than they do in the classroom, according to a study released yesterday.

America's children are such savvy multitaskers that they pack 8 1/2 hours of media exposure into 6 1/2 hours of each day, seven days a week, reports the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation study.

"When kids are spending a quarter of their time on anything, it's worth looking at," says Kaiser Vice President Vicky J. Rideout, in discussing the study of more than 2,000 8- to 18-year-olds around the country called "Generation M: Media in the Lives of Children."

This multitasking is on the upswing, the study shows, when compared with a similar study the foundation conducted in 1999. Now, 26 percent of kids age 8 to 18 multitask, where in 1999 16 percent did that.

Kaiser President and CEO Drew Altman brought home the message yesterday by showing a picture of his 16-year-old daughter Jessica, "doing what we used to call 'studying,' " he said to much laughter from a group of several hundred children's advocates and industry executives who had gathered at Kaiser's Washington office.

In the photo, the Menlo Park, Calif., high school junior sits at a desk in her bedroom with one foot propped on a computer. She's talking on the phone, writing a paper on her PC, a math book in her lap, IM-ing and e-mailing while Internet radio blares. A boombox sits at the ready, and the television is on.

Despite the increased media exposure, the study finds that most children describe themselves as having lots of friends, getting along well with their parents and being happy at school. However, the children who use more media are lowest on this
"contentedness" scale devised by the study.

Kaiser is a nonprofit organization that focuses on health care and children's media issues. Since the foundation's original study in 1999, the time kids spend on video games and computers has more than doubled, but television time remains the same. Nearly 9 in 10 children live in a home with a computer, and 7 in 8 have a video game console of some kind.

Calling media exposure a "contagion," Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) told those at Kaiser yesterday that parental oversight of media use is like childproofing a home to protect toddlers.

"We are conducting an experiment on this generation of children," said Clinton, a longtime advocate for young people, "and we have no idea what the effects will be."

Rideout says that despite increased computer access in the home, there is still a "digital divide" based on ethnicity and economic status. Eighty percent of white children have Internet access at home, compared to nearly 67 percent of Hispanic children and 61 percent of African American children.

Regardless of race, in many of those homes, kids' bedrooms have become media palaces. Sixty-eight percent of all kids have a television in their bedrooms, a statistic which has not significantly changed, but now 54 percent also have VCRs or DVD players, up from 36 percent in 1999, and 37 percent have cable or satellite TV access, up from 29 percent.

Rideout speculates that the increase in VCRs has happened because parents buy DVD players and give the old machines to their kids.

And though many parents worry about the content of the media their children see and hear, most kids say their parents have no rules or, if they do, don't enforce them.

"The kids whose parents enforce rules look really different from the kids whose parents don't," Rideout says.

"The kids in homes where there are rules spend less time with electronic media and more time reading. Those goals are achievable," Rideout says. "The habits you set have a real influence.

"If parents are concerned about the amount of time their children spend with media, there are some simple steps they can take: Take the TV out of the bedroom, turn the TV off, be consistent," she adds.

In 63 percent of homes a television is usually on during meals, and in 51 percent the television is on most of the time, regardless of whether anyone is watching it.

About 53 percent of children in seventh through 12th grade say their family has no rules about TV watching. Forty-six percent say there are rules, but only 20 percent say those rules are enforced most of the time. The rules usually focus on getting homework and chores done before watching television.

In addition, few parents use the elaborate ratings system set up to help them make choices about what their kids listen to and watch. Six percent of kids say their parents use the technology afforded by the V-chip to restrict TV content, 14 percent say their parents
check the parental advisories on music, and 10 percent say their parents check video game ratings.

"We are not being judgmental," says Rideout. "There are probably as many reasons for parents' behavior as there are parents. They may feel comfortable with their kids' media use, feel there is a good balance, and that there is an implicit understanding of the rules.

"Or parents may be overwhelmed by their own hectic lives and may not have the time to monitor their kids in this way."

That means that many children are exposed to content designed for older groups. For example, nearly half the kids have gone to an R-rated movie without their parents.

The study shows that 65 percent of seventh- through 12th-graders have played the controversial video game Grand Theft Auto. Rated for mature audiences (over age 17), it is heavy on violence and larceny, showing the beating of prostitutes and killing of police officers.

CNN senior political analyst Jeff Greenfield, who moderated a discussion based on the study, told the group with great understatement, "The first time my son showed me Grand Theft Auto, it provoked a very strong reaction in me."

Alain Tascan, vice president of game maker Electronic Arts, which makes blockbuster games such as The Sims, but not Grand Theft Auto, told the group, "As a parent I wouldn't like my kids to play that game. It's not appropriate under 18, but over 18 I am for creative freedom."

Television and music dominate children's media time -- nearly four hours a day are spent with TV, including videos and DVDs, and 1 ¼ hours a day are spent listening to music.

After television, kids spend more time with music than with any other medium. And yet parents may know the least about it.

"For older teens music has always had a special place," Rideout says. "Teen TV use drops off and music listening goes up. TV has always gone down as teens are involved in more activities, gain independence and have more mobility."

In this area, the biggest change from the 1999 study is how teenagers access music, with many more downloading and streaming music and using digital music players such as iPods, Rideout says.

"This is an absolutely significant phenomenon," she says.

The survey of a national representative sample of children was conducted between October 2003 and March 2004, with a sampling error of plus or minus 3.8 percent. Children and teenagers were asked to anonymously fill out questionnaires in their classrooms. In addition, 694 children completed seven-day media-use diaries.
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