



# A safe environment for children

Qualitative and quantitative findings

September 2005

# Contents

Section		Page
	Foreword	3
	Executive summary	4
	Background	7
	<b>Part 1: Qualitative research</b>	
1.1	Introduction	9
1.2	Detailed summary	10
1.3	The context of a safe environment	14
1.4	The influence of soap operas	22
1.5	Attitudes to regulation	28
	Appendix A: the sample	30
	<b>Part 2: Quantitative research</b>	
2.1	Introduction	32
2.2	Which media are of most concern?	33
2.3	Which age of children are felt to be at risk?	35
2.4	Levels of concern about pre-watershed content	36
2.5	Types of concern about pre-watershed content	40
2.6	Opinions about the purpose of soap operas	42
2.7	Views on who should be responsible	44
2.8	Parental control over children's viewing	45
	Appendix B: who watches soap operas	46

# Foreword

Section 319 (1) of the Communications Act 2003 (“The Act”) requires Ofcom to set a Code which contains standards for the content of television and radio services. The Ofcom Broadcasting Code, took effect on 25 July 2005<sup>1</sup>. The Code applies to all broadcasters regulated by Ofcom, with certain exceptions in the case of the BBC (Sections Five, Six, Nine and Ten) and S4C (part of Section Six).

The Act requires that those under eighteen should be protected and Section One of the Broadcasting Code concerns the protection of the under-eighteens. It contains a number of rules regarding scheduling and content information (Rules 1.1 to 1.7) and specific rules regarding drugs, smoking, solvents and alcohol, violence and dangerous behaviour, offensive language and sex ( Rules 1.10 to 1.17).

The independent research published here assists in the consideration of points raised by the public consultation on the Ofcom Broadcasting Code which began in July 2004. It will aid Ofcom in the interpretation of Section One of the Code and also to a certain extent of rules in Section Two: Harm and offence, in particular Rules 2.1 and 2.3.

The research was commissioned as an outcome of Phase 1 of Ofcom’s 2004 Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) Review, and as such applies in particular to the terrestrial broadcasters BBC1 and BBC2, ITV, Channel 4 and Five. However it deals with issues which are pertinent to all broadcasters. In Phase 1 of the PSB Review, research identified concern from viewers about the extent to which television was providing a safe viewing environment for children. In addition, there has also been wider viewer concern about the suitability of some pre-watershed content for children. This research explores attitudes to pre-watershed viewing in the context of other types of potential media influences on children and young people.

This research provides directional steers to broadcasters and to Ofcom. It contributes to our understanding but is not to be used to create hard and fast rules about when and how content can be broadcast. What it can do is indicate issues that broadcasters may need to consider in scheduling content and in deciding whether to broadcast information about content. It may also indicate issues Ofcom may need to take account of in considering cases and complaints.

---

<sup>1</sup> with the exception of rule 10.17 which took effect on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2005

# Executive summary

In Phase 1 of Ofcom's first PSB Review, research identified concern from viewers about the extent to which television was providing a safe viewing environment for children. In addition, there has also been wider viewer concern about the suitability of pre-watershed content for children.

Ofcom decided to commission new audience research to further investigate these issues. The key aim was to frame concerns and attitudes about children's pre-watershed viewing in the context of concerns about other types of media, to ascertain the relative strength of feeling about early evening content.

Ofcom conducted two pieces of audience research, one qualitative and one quantitative, during the summer of 2004.

## Qualitative findings

### *Wider social context*

Overall, respondents in the qualitative research wanted to talk about the general unease they felt about what children had to face in modern society: how dangerous the world had become generally; the inadequate preparation for life that some parents give their children; and the effect this can have on children in terms of respect, motivation and behaviour.

They felt that these issues were the most important ones, and that whilst the media had some role in contributing to what they saw as declining standards and children's ability to protect themselves, they were much more worried about bad parenting than pre-watershed content.

The logic of their thinking was expressed as follows:

- Children are necessarily exposed to a range of dangers nowadays: bullying, 'stranger danger', heavy traffic etc.
- It is impossible and undesirable to shelter children – particularly those aged 8-9 and older – from 'the outside world'. Rather, the imperative is for parents to instil the right attitudes in their children, and prepare them for a world where they are exposed to these dangers
- Bad parenting has created a significant proportion of badly behaved children who use their 'rights' to get away with such bad behaviour
- These children exert an influence on their well-brought-up peers – something almost all parents are very concerned about

### ***Media influences***

- The internet was most worrying for two main reasons - because of its explicit content, and because respondents felt they didn't understand it as well as their children did
- Television presented less concern as it was a medium parents understood and regarded as 'safer'
- Elements of the media were felt to contribute to declining standards of behaviour – particularly teen magazines and pop/ music videos with their explicit sexual content

### ***Pre-watershed content***

- In general, the watershed was seen to be an effective way of regulating early evening content on terrestrial television
- The chief concern in relation to pre-watershed soaps was that :
  - they 'fan the fire' of antisocial and sexually explicit behaviour amongst young people, and
  - by continually portraying more and more aggressive, antisocial behaviour and its consequences, they normalise and even promote, on occasions, such behaviour

### ***Regulation***

- Parents largely accept that they share responsibility for regulating their children's viewing
- Most respondents noted the effectiveness of the watershed
- Respondents also felt it would be useful:
  - to be involved in and contribute to the debate about acceptable standards
  - to be clear about who was regulating and the rules which applied
  - to enforce consistently these standards and the current line to be held

## Quantitative findings

Findings from the quantitative research underpin the qualitative results.

- The type of media that causes most concern is the Internet (61% of respondents)
- Pre-watershed television was of concern to 19% of respondents
- In this study 47% of respondents have no concern about pre-watershed TV content
- Music videos are of most concern in terms of pre-watershed television (25% of overall sample)
- Concern about soaps is higher among soap avoiders than among soap watchers
- Children aged 11-14 are felt to be the age-group most at risk
- Respondents feel it is primarily parents' responsibility to ensure that children are protected from inappropriate content pre- and post-watershed – a view from parents as well as non-parents
- Around 1 in 10 parents find something inappropriate on pre-watershed TV once a week or more, and take action as a result

The results from the quantitative survey indicate that, while there are some concerns about soaps, these are less pressing for the majority of respondents than concerns about certain other media, particularly the Internet.

# Background

Research carried out for Phase I of Ofcom's PSB Review identified concern from viewers about the extent to which television was providing a safe viewing environment for children<sup>2</sup>. As part of the review we conducted a survey of over 4,000 viewers across the UK to find out what they thought of a variety of aspects of television. We gave them a list of 35 key components of what might constitute public service broadcasting, and asked them to say which they felt it was important to provide.

85% of respondents to our survey agreed that "a schedule of programmes that protects children from unsuitable content" was important – only the provision of TV news was rated higher. However, only 46% of those that found it important felt satisfied with its delivery<sup>3</sup>. This differential (39%) – between the high number that found this issue important and those that were satisfied with its provision – was among the widest of the list of aspects of PSB.

Furthermore, in our deliberative forums during Phase 1 of the Review, concern was expressed by some participants over the suitability of pre-watershed programming, especially soap operas, when children are still watching. Interestingly, parents in our Phase 1 survey appeared somewhat more inclined than those without children in the home to say that they were satisfied with "a schedule of programmes that protects children from unsuitable content" (50%:44%). Similarly, those that valued soaps – defined as those placing soap operas within their "top two" genres of personal importance – seemed also more positive about the delivery of such a schedule – 54% of this sub-group were satisfied, compared with 45% of those that did not list soaps as one of their top two genres. This would appear to indicate that concern is most apparent among those without direct experience either of soaps or of children's viewing.

In order to understand better these results, and as a result of indications of some wider viewer concern about the suitability of pre-watershed content for children, Ofcom decided to commission the following two studies. Both research projects focused on the following key questions:

- Which media are of most concern in terms of their influence on children?
- Is pre-watershed television programming a particular concern?
- Are soap operas of particular concern and if so why?
- Which age-group is seen as most vulnerable?
- Who ought to be responsible for what children see?

---

<sup>2</sup> Ofcom, 2004: PSB Phase 1 Supporting Documents Volume 1: The role of television in society

<sup>3</sup> Our Phase 1 publication erroneously reported that 28% of those that found the protection of children important were satisfied with its delivery - the correct figure is 46% satisfied. However, since the gap between those that found this particular issue important (85%) and those that were satisfied with its provision (46%) remains one of the largest gaps (39%) out of the list of 35 PSB components, our Phase 1 conclusion is unchanged.

In addition, the qualitative research had an additional, contextualising focus on how concerns over media fitted in with wider concerns or opinions about general influences on children.



# Part 1: Qualitative research

## 1.1 Introduction

The research objectives for this project were as follows :

- To what extent is concern about a safe environment for children a TV-specific concern or one related to media consumption and daily life more generally?
- What do viewers think should be the appropriate regulatory or broadcaster response (if any)?

This entailed the following:

- Identifying what a “safe environment” means in the context of television
  - in relation to vulnerable age groups
  - in relation to older children who enjoy more demanding material
  - in relation to respondents’ own children or children they deal with
- Determining whether, and in what way, a safe television environment is important in the context of other media
- Setting those elements in the context of concerns about a safe environment for children in daily life
- Identifying what this means in terms of demands made of the regulator and broadcasters

Counterpoint Research was commissioned by Ofcom to carry out this research. Focus groups, paired interviews and depth interviews were carried out. In total, 12 groups were held with adults, 8 paired interviews with young people (aged 14-18), and 4 depth interviews with teachers and social workers: a total of around 116 respondents. A detailed breakdown of the sample is included at Appendix A.

Fieldwork was carried out across the UK during August 2004 in a range of locations reflecting a variety of socio-economic factors: London, Swansea, Poole, Harlow, Oakham, Newcastle, Renfrewshire and Bangor (Northern Ireland).

The adult sample was designed to capture the views of parents and soap fans in particular, but also to ensure that the views of non-fans of soaps, and those without children in the home, were also reflected.

Young people (aged 14–18) were interviewed in friendship pairs, and this included some discussion of their feelings about younger siblings watching soaps. The sample therefore comprised some young people with, and some without, younger brothers or sisters.

The views of two social workers and two teachers were also canvassed to see the extent to which their views tallied with or diverged from those of the general adult sample.

## 1.2 Detailed summary

### Is a “safe environment” for children a TV-specific concern?

It is important to state that the idea of a “safe environment” in any context was rejected by respondents. No-one, they argued, could keep a child completely safe, and indeed in many ways it would be undesirable to try to. They argued that children need contact with some of the unpleasant things in life in order to further their development, they need to be challenged in order to achieve, and if they are to evolve into true individuals, they need to explore and settle their own boundaries.

That said, the broader and more realistic aim of protecting children from *premature* exposure to negative influences, and from some particularly undesirable influences completely, was seen as a legitimate goal. Here, television by no means caused the most concern.

Respondents were more concerned about the internet, music videos and music lyrics, and teen magazines. To a large extent, TV was seen as the least worrying of these because it is a medium that parents understand and regard as 'safer' and/or more regulated.

All media were criticised for being unhelpful in the way that 'laddish', aggressive and sexually explicit behaviour is seen to be promoted. Respondents cited celebrities behaving badly, poor role models in the media, as well as inappropriate body images which glorify the thin, the beautiful and the provocative.

Soaps were far from the only programmes to cause concern. Reality TV programmes - especially *Big Brother* – were seen as equally problematic if not more so. Although the majority of *Big Brother* (5) coverage on Channel 4 was broadcast post-watershed during the fieldwork period, the series was heavily criticised by adults on two fronts. Firstly, respondents were very concerned that the programme makers were cynically manipulating the choice of contestant, and the tasks they were set, to maximise drama, emotion, and ultimately violence in order to raise the ratings; and secondly, they felt that the contestants' behaviour and attitudes were unacceptable.

More widely, there were other influences beyond the media that were much more worrying: specifically, poor parenting and ill-disciplined families, peer pressure which could lead to children getting involved in or being the victim of bullying, drink/drug abuse, and other types of violence.

### Which age-group is perceived as being most vulnerable?

Parents invariably felt that they protected their children from most bad influences when they were very young, and perhaps more importantly, provided them with a context and strategy for dealing with bad influences when they couldn't protect them once they were older. However, the process of bringing up a child was regarded as 'walking a tightrope': to over-protect by banning things was to invite rebellion; to give children too much choice was to spoil them and possibly to expose them to harm.

In terms of TV output – as well as most other influences - the difficult ages were identified as mainly from 8-9 until 13-14.

The areas where television did give rise to concern were children having access to post-watershed programming and their becoming much more aware of the innuendo in soap storylines.

That said, most parents felt that innuendo in plot lines, including implied sexual relationships or violence, tended to go over the heads of young children. Older children were felt to be able to cope with what is shown at that time: indeed, a great many respondents felt it absolutely appropriate that children who are turning into young adults should be confronted by some of life's more challenging areas in this context. However parents were willing to accept that in the more difficult middle years (8 – 14), it was their own, personal responsibility to keep an eye on what their children were watching, and to use the opportunities given to them by soaps to discuss difficult issues.

### **Influences on children**

Parents worried about a whole raft of influences on their children – particularly if they felt they weren't familiar with them. The most worrying elements – peer pressure, the internet, computer games, music lyrics/ videos, and teen magazines – were precisely those that parents felt least able to control.

#### ***The internet***

Respondents were concerned about inappropriate sites, paedophiles trying to make contact with children, and a complete lack of structure which both made it easy for their children to stumble onto sites which might be inappropriate, and also made it difficult for the adults to understand. They were particularly concerned when they felt themselves to be computer illiterate, and thus unable to engage with their children without showing themselves to be ignorant.

That said, respondents were also very uncomfortable with the idea that they disapproved of something so inevitable, ubiquitous and potentially beneficial as the internet.

#### ***Computer games***

Worries included excessive violence, and the perceived 'promotion' and 'normalising' of violence and criminal behaviour. However, many parents drew a clear distinction between their children (whom they admitted often bought 18+ games - "they're not influenced to go off and murder anyone after playing them"), and children generally.

#### ***Contemporary music***

Respondents criticised the explicitness of the language in rap as well as its disrespectful tone. The dress, body movements and general sexual explicitness of music videos and channels was a regular theme in the discussions.

#### ***Girls' magazines***

Mothers in particular worried about the way girls' magazines addressed children in their own language (and how they excluded them as parents), how sexually explicit they were and how they 'normalised' sexual activity (including oral sex) at an inappropriately young age.

### **Television programmes other than soaps**

Respondents were concerned about what they perceived as the 'leakage' of the soap format into other genres. They cited the murders of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in Soham as a case in point: the use of the schoolgirls' first names, the way they were featured every night on the news regardless of whether there had been any developments on the case that day or not, and so on.

Reality TV and animations were also cited as being more and more soap-like in format and structure, and helping to normalise rude, disrespectful and aggressive behaviour.

### **Opinions about soap operas**

In relation to soaps, when given a chance to unpick their general feelings of discontent, most respondents wanted to talk about the poor moral standards, bad behaviour and misery portrayed in some soaps, rather than the explicitness of specific scenes. Because soaps were perceived to copy one another's storylines, any 'issue' dealt with in one was expected to be covered by all the others within a short period of time. This, respondents argued, gave the impression that, for example, teenage pregnancy is now very common, 'normal' and thus acceptable.

Regular viewers (mainly mothers and children) of soaps tended to have a less serious take on the programme content and the effect it could have on young people. They argued that most storylines were predictable, and that newspaper coverage and on-air promotions made it clear exactly what was coming up. They also felt that soaps were not watched in the same way as other dramas, that they aren't programmes the viewer seriously concentrates on, or takes too seriously. They also argued that the dramatic storylines were featured only rarely, and that there would always be a lead up to, and a resolution for dramatic action such as the actions of murderer, Richard Hillman in *Coronation Street*.

Finally, mothers and young people argued that they were often watching together, so that anything upsetting or controversial was talked about between them at the time.

Young people shared a great many of the opinions of the adults. They felt that pre-watershed soaps were not a cause for concern, even for younger, more vulnerable siblings. They argued that there were many more dangerous influences on young people and children, and that soaps actually helped prepare children for adult life by creating opportunities for parents and children to have discussions about difficult topics.

All young people felt that it was parents' duty to keep an eye on what young children were watching, and to stop them watching programmes which they knew would upset them, or have a negative influence on them. They argued that most children know the difference between right and wrong, and that if they behave badly, soap plots shouldn't be used as a scapegoat. It was interesting that they were even more damning towards 'bad parents' than the adults. Indeed, they blamed bad parenting for most social problems.

In contrast, although the teachers and social workers shared many of the perceptions of the general adult sample, they were more concerned about the influence soaps have on

young people<sup>4</sup>. They distinguished between their views in relation to their own children, and their views based on their professional experience.

As with adults in general, they thought that the main influence on bad behaviour was bad parenting. However, they felt that bad parenting was more widespread than other respondents, and thus felt that the media had a more direct influence over young people. They were actively controlling and censoring what their own children watched on television, and kept a very close eye on what they accessed via the web.

However, their main concern about soaps – like the adults – was that they promote and normalise behaviour which is neither ‘normal’ nor worthy of promotion. The difference was one of strength of feeling: they were consistently more conservative and pro-regulation than most of the mainstream sample.

### **What is the appropriate regulatory/broadcaster response?**

Most respondents thought that the current regulatory system *previewed* output to make sure that it didn't contravene any restrictions. While this is not the case, broadcasters should ensure that their output complies with Ofcom's Codes. The watershed was appreciated and most felt it was generally adhered to. However, they felt that the system or regulator was rather complacent, and thus perhaps in collusion with the broadcasters, for two reasons:

- Firstly, they rarely heard of any actions taken against broadcasters and when they did, the fines appeared small in comparison with production budgets, advertising or programme sales revenues
- Secondly, since they were assuming that all output was previewed and approved, they tended to think that when they saw something that surprised them, the “people who look after these things” had approved it. Thus, they felt there was a drip effect, where little by little the programme makers “got away” with a little more each time

Everyone within the sample felt it would be very helpful to have a more public debate about regulation generally. They were aware of the changing nature of how, where and when TV programmes were watched, but thought a public debate ought to be promoted by the regulator.

What parents wanted, above all else, was:

- Clarity about what they could expect
- Support from the regulator in the form of strict imposition of those agreed rules; and
- Involvement in drawing up those rules (since only parents know what is right for their children)

---

<sup>4</sup> Although this was a small sub-sample, the trajectory of their views is consistent with other research which compares the opinions of teachers and others in the “caring professions” with the wider population.

# 1.3 The context of a “safe environment”

## 1.3.1 The protection of children

### Introduction

Respondents were introduced to the idea of the protection of children via the completion of a questionnaire which covered issues such as bullying, violence in the home, the internet etc. The discussion which followed (and which was driven by respondents' spontaneous concerns) generally focused on elements of violence, or influences outside the control of parents.

Respondents felt that the complete protection of children from dangerous or unsuitable influences was neither achievable nor desirable:

- Children would have to be locked up or hidden away in order to avoid being confronted by the dangers of life nowadays
- The best protection for children was to have been brought up by parents who spent time “instilling” the right values in their children, and preparing them to make the right decisions later in life
- It was beneficial for children to be exposed to slightly more demanding things/behaviour/ television, to help them explore their boundaries
- Parents had a responsibility to look after the individual needs of their children: the state, schools, regulators and so on cannot take individual differences into account
- The biggest problem facing people trying to protect children was the consequences of bad parenting
- Peer pressure was particularly hard for children to deal with, and bad behaviour from other children made it seem that such behaviour was normal, acceptable and expected
- The portrayal of this kind of behaviour on television or anywhere else in the media or in public, promoted and cemented the idea that this kind of behaviour was normal, acceptable and expected
- As long as rules were clear about what it was reasonable for any viewer to expect in terms of pre-watershed standards (particularly one trying to make decisions on behalf of children), it was up to individual parents to make decisions about their children

### The importance of parenting

In the early stages of the discussion, most respondents wanted to talk about the low standards of behaviour amongst children, and how dangerous society had become for

children. Although these views tended to be mutually exclusive, they were both grounded in a fundamental belief in the importance of good parenting.

*“They don’t have any respect anymore , it’s down to their upbringing, their parents.”*

*(Father, Eldest Child 11+, BC1, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, Newcastle)*

*“If children aren’t shown how to behave at home I don’t think it really matters what they see on the telly.”*

*(Fathers, Eldest Child Under 10, BC1, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, Bangor)*

Most respondents felt it was crucial that parents took responsibility for preparing their children for later life, and that only they could tailor their children’s necessary exposure to the more difficult, controversial, dangerous or disagreeable influences in their lives. All of them felt it was inappropriate for the state, and most felt it was inappropriate for schools to have this responsibility. They believed that there was a need to be sensitive to the needs of individual children, rather than a “lowest common denominator” approach.

*“You can’t make the rules for kids in children’s homes, that’s the social work department’s job, they have to look after those children”*

*(Male, C2D, Non-parents, 40+, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, London)*

*“That’s the nanny state”*

*(Female, BC1, Non-Viewers of Soaps, Non-parent, 40+, Renfrewshire)*

Interestingly, the young people we spoke with echoed that view very clearly.

*“If someone gets upset by something they see on television, they shouldn’t have been watching it, their parents should have stopped them watching it”*

*(Female, C2D, Year 10, Watford)*

In discussion of all the potential bad influences on children, therefore, most respondents argued that parents should make the key decisions, based on good and reliable information. Rules were seen to restrict parents in some senses – the whole issue of “a safe environment” or the protection of children was felt to be about judgment calls, not “one size fits all” regulation.

*“Only the parent can know what their kids can handle.”*

*(Mothers, Eldest Child Under 10, C2D, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, Oakham)*

*“I wouldn’t want anybody telling me ‘don’t let your children watch EastEnders’, whatever is on it... they are my children I know what they are ready for.”*

*(Fathers, Eldest Child Under 10, BC1, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, Bangor)*

However, in order to make good “judgement calls”, adults, children and professionals all felt that it was crucial to have reliable, clear information. Both adults and young people wanted to be clear about where lines were drawn, where grey areas were, what could be assumed and what was legitimately subject for debate. Interestingly, one of the most contentious discussions amongst adults tended to be around the idea that there were clearer rules and standards in the past, which were shared, and that one of the most

difficult issues for parents nowadays was fragmentation, and the multiplicity of different rules which different families adhered to.

*"It just beggars belief, what some parents nowadays let their children off with"*  
(Mothers, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, Eldest Child 11+, London)

Throughout the discussion of potential influences on children, the adults were very nostalgic – apologetically nostalgic – about the relative safety and freedom they had enjoyed as children:

*(First respondent) "I got my breakfast and then I didn't see my mother until lunchtime, and then not again till it was time to come home for tea" -*

*- (Second respondent) "I got a packed lunch!"*  
(Males, C2D, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, Eldest Child under 10, Renfrewshire)

A constant theme was how parents used to be able to set boundaries that they would enforce, and that those boundaries tended to be shared with other parents – everyone understood what was required, and everyone was working to the same standards of expected behaviour. They felt this engendered a community feeling, whereby other parents – and citizens - participated in the good upbringing of children. Nowadays, they argued, they were frightened to comment or intervene with children in public, because they were likely to encounter the wrath of both that child's parents, and the child themselves.

*"I don't interfere, not anymore, you'd get some mad dad banging on your door saying leave my kids alone, it isn't worth it."*  
(Fathers, Eldest Child Under 10, BC1, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, Bangor)

*"There is no community anymore, nobody speaks up."*  
(Mothers, Eldest Child Under 10, C2D, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, Oakham)

*"Even at school the teachers haven't got any control they can't do anything ... it's because the government has taken away their power."*  
(Mothers, Eldest Child Under 10, C2D, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, Oakham)

*"It's all about rights now and we haven't got any."*  
(Fathers, Eldest Child Under 10, BC1, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, Bangor)

At some point in this discussion most admitted that they had tried drinking and smoking and probably sexual exploration whilst still underage. However almost all felt that the boundaries had moved far too far in terms of children's behaviour, dress and attitude. They felt that the levels of binge drinking, drug taking, physical and sexual violence in the home had all dramatically increased. They were concerned that children were far more exposed to dangers in the street, from speeding cars, four wheel drive vehicles and motorcycles. They were also concerned about children's exposure to commercial interests. The importance of brands to children was criticised, as were the advertisers and marketers – as well as celebrities – who helped make brand more important than quality.



*"You see those mothers with those incredibly tight, short T-shirts and little mini-skirts waiting at the school, and you think, what kind of role model is that for the kids coming out of the school ... But then you only have to look at a pop video nowadays, they all dress like that"*

*(Female, BC1, non-viewers of soaps, non-parent, 40+, Brighton)*

Of most concern was that children were being given choice in inappropriate ways by their parents.

*"They ask them what they want to wear in the morning, you don't ask a child that"*  
*(Female, BC1, Non-viewers of soaps, Non-parent, 40+, Renfrewshire)*

*"You see them hanging about, on street corners, in the park and you can't help wondering what their parents are doing."*

*(Non-parent Women, 20-40, C2D, Soap Fans, Bangor)*

Many of the adult respondents were critical of parents who didn't draw appropriate lines between adults and children: they criticised mothers in particular for dressing like teenagers, and for dressing their children like "little Britneys". Generally the issue for both parents and non-parents within the sample was that there should be a definable line between childhood and parenthood, and that parents were encouraging their children to act in an inappropriately grown up way, whilst indulging in some 'carefree youth' behaviour themselves (binge drinking, drugs, seeing their children as their friends, not taking responsibility etc.).

The consequence of this bad parenting was that parents were not in control, and children were putting themselves at risk. Whilst most respondents were uncomfortable prescribing what young girls in particular should wear -

*"Listen to me, I sound like my grandfather"*

*(Male, C2D, Non-parent, 40+, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, Brighton)*

- they balanced this discomfort by arguing that it was both dangerous for young people to be dressing in such a sexually explicit way, and that there was something deeply worrying about parents letting their children (usually daughters) dress in that manner.

On the other hand, it was also noted in the groups that too much parental control also had its drawbacks, and was neither desirable nor effective:

*"She only gets out for karate classes, ... I don't think that's right"*

*(Empty nester, Female, BC1, non-viewers of Soaps, 40+, Renfrewshire)*

*"As soon as they get a chance, the kids go absolutely mad"*

*(Mothers, Eldest Child 11+, BC1, under 40, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, London)*

*"You sometimes worry they're not going to be streetwise. They've got to know what is going on in the real world."*

*(Mothers, Eldest Child 11+ , C2D, Soap Fans, Newcastle)*

### 1.3.2 Influences on children

When asked to reflect on the influences on children which caused them concern, respondents tended to construct a list which featured overtly dangerous situations and people: criminals, drug pushers, busy roads, bullies etc. However, the next most important set of concerns were influences that parents found difficult to control.

#### Peer pressure

Peer pressure was a real worry to parents as their children got older. Since they couldn't assume that other parents would be working to the same set of standards, they were anxious that their children were not exposed to other children's values and start arguing with them over what was right and "normal".

*"It's the 'he can do that mummy, why can't I'"  
(Mothers, Children over 10, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, London)*

*"I think she's sensible, but you worry about other children in her school"  
(Mothers, BC1, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, Eldest child 11+, London)*

*"I don't let him buy any of those games, but I know he gets to play them when he's out"  
(Mothers, Eldest child 11+, C2D, Soap Fans, Newcastle)*

Worries about children's exposure to drugs, alcohol and underage sex were all grouped under the heading of 'peer pressure', since most adults – and indeed the young people too – felt that pressure to experiment tended to come from children's peers rather than an idea picked up from newspapers, television or the internet. The point here was that adults felt that every generation naturally tries to push the boundaries back, and that this was both necessary and positive. However, the most difficult-to-resist pressure comes from needing to feel accepted by peers. The media was seen to contribute to this pressure when it portrayed bad behaviour as "normal", and therefore lent weight to the pressure children's peers were putting them under.

*"It just doesn't help"  
(Mothers, BC1, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, Eldest child 11+, London)*

#### The Internet

The internet itself was also a source of significant concern. Those who were knowledgeable about the internet tended to feel both less and more worried about children surfing the internet and being in chat rooms. They tended to know the range of inappropriate sites which children could fairly easily have access to, but they also felt more confident talking with their children about such sites, and about setting parental controls in a way children would find hard to circumvent (although they always felt that it was a possibility). The less knowledgeable tended to be very worried indeed about its influence, and felt totally powerless in the face of its ubiquity and inevitability.

*"You might hate it, but it's a fact of life now. All you can do is instil the right values in your children and then you hope that they'll be sensible"  
(Male, C2D, Non-parent, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, 40+)*

Certainly all felt that one of the most dangerous pressures came via persuasive paedophiles in internet chat rooms. Young people argued that most of the “bad” ones had been closed down, and so the danger from paedophiles had been significantly reduced. Adults still saw chat rooms as a significant concern.

Interestingly, a few young people mentioned malicious gossip sites as being far more of a threat nowadays: sites where children in the same school publish criticism of one another, and friends defend one another. This was judged to be an extremely cruel form of peer pressure – and a couple of young girls had regretted responding to criticisms they had read there.

*“It’s really nasty. I’m sorry I ever looked at what they’d written, but when you know they’re saying things about you, you can’t not look”  
(Female, C2D, Year 10, London)*

### **Computer games**

Computer games were less of an issue, although parents of young boys were concerned by the level of explicit violence, and thus the “promotion” and “normalisation” of violence they felt they entailed. In the period running up to the fieldwork a young man had been convicted of murder and it had been reported that he had played the 18+ game ‘Manhunt’, which may have heightened awareness of the potential influence of games. However, most adults were caught between feeling that one has to trust children not to confuse games and real life, and feeling uncomfortable that games with such a high and explicit level of violence were available.

*“It’s one of those one in a million things, how many kids played that game and didn’t go out and murder anyone”  
(Male, C2D, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, Eldest Child under 10, Renfrewshire)*

### **Adult films**

The issue of adult films being watched by young children was brought up, but in a fairly low-key way. Most adults admitted to having watched 18-rated films when younger, so were reluctant to sound hypocritical. There was, however a real discomfort that as today’s films were felt to be perceptibly more violent, explicit, aggressive etc., it was perhaps not a good idea to condone children watching such films under age.

#### **1.3.3 Which age-group is perceived as being most vulnerable?**

Among both parents and those without children living in the home, a fairly consistent picture emerged of when and how children might be vulnerable. Each stage seemed to bring with it its own set of concerns.

From birth to the ages of seven or eight most parents felt that they could control the influences on their children sufficiently, so that they could be protected. It was during this period that parents would try to set rules, and, crucially, explain why those rules were important.

*“I don’t think I need to worry just yet, I still have some say over what goes on the telly”*

*(Fathers, Eldest Child Under 10, BC1, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, Bangor)*

*“I’m lucky, she’s still relatively young, but you can tell she’s coming up to that age”*

*(Fathers, C2D, Children under 10, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, Renfrewshire)*

Many parents explicitly referred to this age as when they tried to “*instil*” the right values, and restrict their children’s access to what they considered the wrong values – including the values of the parents of their children’s friends.

From ages 8/9 until 13/14 most parents and non-parents felt that children were most vulnerable to all of the influences they worried about. They encountered different attitudes outside their control (school, friends, street, leisure venues), and worryingly, parents knew they weren’t ‘cool’ to their children at this age, leaving them with limited input. They felt that this was the age when children explored their boundaries, and in the context of secondary school, this meant a set of influences which were potentially quite frightening for both the children and the parents.

*“They’ve got everything there [drug/alcohol abuse, truanting, aggressive behaviour towards teachers]”*

*(Female, BC1, Non-viewers of soaps, Non-parent, 40+)*

Parents in particular felt that secondary school was seen as the main ‘rite of passage’; children went from the top year in primary school to the bottom of the hierarchy, and were immediately exposed to many new things.

*“You feel for them, don’t you, but there’s nothing you can do except let them know you’re there”*

*(Male, C2D, Mixed Attitude to Soaps, Eldest child under 10, Renfrewshire)*

Finally, after the age of around 14, it was felt that “the damage”, or the preparation, was done. The argument was that at this stage no parent could stop children behaving the way they wanted to.

Parents often reported regretting not being able to talk with their own parents more explicitly, but felt that in relation to their children, being too embarrassed to talk about issues was no longer an option. Unfortunately or fortunately it was felt to be absolutely necessary, and indeed irresponsible not to.

*“How can you not?”*

*(Empty nester, Female, BC1, non-viewers of Soaps, 40+, Renfrewshire)*

### **1.3.4 Young people’s attitudes**

There was very little difference between adults’ attitudes and those of the young people we spoke with. Certainly the young people admitted the kind of experimentation their parents suspected them of, and argued that there were so many more dangers and bad influences to be dealt with that television generally was really not a concern. Inasmuch as they had concerns about their younger siblings, it was that they shouldn’t have to be exposed to bad behaviour from their peers.

All felt that their own parents were open in terms of talking about issues, and that this was a good thing. Their greatest concern was for those children who felt they couldn't approach their parents about something that was worrying them.

*“If someone’s being bullied, and they don’t have an older brother or sister, and they don’t feel they can talk to their mum, that must be terrible”*  
(Female, C2D, Year 10, London)

They argued consistently that the main danger for young children was if they had parents who didn't care, didn't spend time with them, and let them do exactly what they wanted to do. They often used exactly the same language as the adults.

*“If her mum isn’t interested in what she’s watching on television, or what she’s doing after school, I think that’s really bad”*  
(Female, C2D, Year 10, London)

### **1.3.5 Teachers and social workers**

As with adults in general, the small sub-sample of 'carers' thought that the main influence on bad behaviour was bad parenting. Where they tended to differ from the adult sample was in their view that bad parenting was more widespread and particularly linked to controlling access to inappropriate media influences.

*“Adults are too busy these days – they’ve no time to supervise what their children are doing properly”*  
(Teacher in Secondary School, Harlow)

For these professionals, the influence that TV had on children's behaviour was felt to be significant and often negative. While the internet was seen as probably the most worrying of the media in terms of what it may expose children to, TV was judged to be all-pervasive and their concern was that most parents have very lax attitudes towards controlling their children's access to it.

Unlike most other respondents, the professional carers tended to feel that the media had the power to influence all children across all age groups, although those from poorly-parented backgrounds would be the ones to exhibit more of the effects. They felt that such children will be more prone to unaccompanied viewing, staying up later, less parental control and less provision of a positive context or strategies to deal with awkward or alarming subject matters.

*“If it’s easier (for the parents), the kids watch what they want”*  
(Teacher in Secondary School, Harlow)

## 1.4 The influence of soap operas

When the subject of soap operas was raised, two issues tended to emerge:

- The number of soaps in the pre-watershed schedule
- The implications that this had for the pre-watershed schedule in terms of a lack of variety, texture, 'events' and ultimately choice

Indeed, a significant minority of respondents were sceptical about the potential of soaps to influence children and young people. Specifically, many parents of young children, and adults without children living at home, felt that the whole question of the influence of soaps on children and young people was irrelevant. They argued that children simply didn't watch soaps, except perhaps *Hollyoaks*, which was made for younger viewers and therefore there was not an issue. Despite the moderators pointing out the viewing figures for soaps, many simply refused to believe that this type of programme was watched by children. They found it hard to form a view on the influence of soaps, arguing that even if children are around when soaps are on, they weren't really watching them.

### Storylines

Participants felt that because soaps tend to be set in one place, this resulted in character-driven plots. Therefore, in order to change the pace or be more involving or dramatic, they felt that scriptwriters tended to put one of the characters into a difficult or controversial situation, or give them an "issue" to deal with.

*"It's all issues, you think, there can't have been that many murders in one street"*  
(Male, C2D, Non-parents, 40+, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, London)

Because they felt that programme makers did this on such a regular basis, and because they were seen to leverage the press and on-air trailing, respondents saw such "strong" storylines as manipulation of the audience. This meant that they had started to judge soaps as ratings-driven marketing machines, cynically including storylines because of commercial concerns. Even the soap fans were sceptical about the way they were constructed and executed.

*"It's all just about ratings, it's all about money"*  
(Fathers, C2D, Mixed Attitude to Soaps, Eldest Child under 11, Renfrewshire)

*"They don't have storylines any more, just teenage pregnancies, murder, gay kisses ..."*  
(Female, BC1, Non-viewers of Soaps, Non-parents, 40+, Brighton)

Whilst most felt that soap makers had always been in the business of getting ratings, there was a feeling that this manipulation had increased dramatically over the past four or five years. Participants argued that with the increase in the number and frequency of soaps in the schedule, programme makers had more pressure put on them to deliver a consistent audience, and to lure viewers away from competitor soaps.

For the soap fans, this was not a great matter for criticism: they felt that soaps shouldn't be taken too seriously, and that *"everyone knows they 'do' an issue every now and then"*. Because the non-viewers were only hearing about the soap plots via the promotion of sensational storylines, they tended to feel that the soaps were constantly "promoting" such storylines.

Respondents were not so concerned about the *explicitness* of what was shown onscreen.

*"They're not going to show a naked breast on Coronation Street now are they?"  
(Female, BC1, Non-viewers of TV Soaps, non-parent, 40+, Brighton)*

Rather, their concern was that the 'issue' would be compounded with another - for example, the *Coronation Street* storyline in which a gay teenager is engaged; his fiancée is pregnant; and they lose the baby. Respondents felt that combining these issues served to sensationalise them, rather than deal with them in a realistic way.

Another concern raised in relation to the soaps was that their structure or format was "infecting" other types of programmes - from thrillers, police drama and reality TV through to news.

*"The Holly and Jessica thing really got to her, it was good in a way because we could talk to her about how it's not just stranger danger, but the way they went on and on and on about it every day, even if nothing had happened just made her more upset. I stopped her watching the news for a while"  
(Male, C2D, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, Eldest Child under 11, Renfrewshire)*

Finally, almost all the groups wanted to talk about the absence of one-off dramas and other types of programmes in the pre-watershed schedule, which they felt would be positively good for children to view, rather than the 'lazy' option of the soaps.

They felt that within other types of pre-watershed drama, stronger material or even the portrayal of what they were describing as a 'bad attitude' would be more acceptable compared with soaps. They felt that such portrayals would happen less regularly, and be more integrated into a narrative.

*"In a proper drama it would be handled differently. I mean we had all these kitchen sink dramas that were really explicit when I was younger"  
(Male, C2D, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, Non-parents, 40+, Brighton)*

## Differences between soap fans and non-fans

### Soap fans

Many respondents – including all of the young people and the more enthusiastic soap viewers, who made up around a third of the sample – felt that soaps were not to be taken too seriously. They argued that they were easy viewing with a predictable plot, and that once the viewer got to know the characters, tiny nuances could make the viewer laugh and get a point over.

*“Dot Cotton, she just raises her eyebrow and you have to laugh”  
(Friendship Pair, Female, C2D, Year 10, London)*

*“They’re just soaps, I don’t know why people get upset about them”  
(Friendship Pair, Female, C2D, Year 10, London)*

Furthermore, they felt that soaps brought up events which happened in real life, giving both parents and children the chance or opening to talk about such issues. Teenage pregnancy, gay storylines, bullying, underage sex, and exam pressures were some of the topics mentioned in this context.

*“It gives you the chance to say ‘does that happen in your school?’”  
(Mothers, BC1, Eldest child 11+, Mixed Viewers of Soaps, London)*

Ultimately these viewers felt that soaps were simply good, easy, early evening viewing, which portrayed events that happen in real life. They agreed with the criticism that the plots could be very over-blown and very over-done. However they argued that this was because they were dramas - they had to be overly dramatic to be interesting.

They defended such plots by arguing that the “baddies” in soaps always had to face the consequences of their actions – even though this might happen after a considerable time.

Young people tended to echo the attitudes of the adult sample very closely. They tended to take soaps fairly light-heartedly, and dismissed criticisms of their influence on children as “silly”. They felt patronised by adult concern that they, or their younger siblings, might take them too seriously and be influenced by them.

*“It’s not real life, you don’t go away thinking, oh I’ll do that, or that’s normal”  
(Paired depth, Female, Year 11, Soap Fans, London)*

However, like adults, they sometimes voiced concern at how depressing storylines in *EastEnders* could be, and how many plot lines include big issues.

*“I’m not very keen on them, they’re just boring, ... people shouting at each other and girls getting pregnant”  
(Male, BC1, Year 10, Glasgow)*

They found it hard to consider the soaps as having a negative or dangerous influence on young people, since they felt that other influences were far more important and dangerous : for example, drugs, alcohol, underage sex, and violence.



## Non-fans/Mixed attitudes

In contrast, those who were less familiar with soaps were much more concerned about pre-watershed soaps and their storylines. They worried that children and young people might be watching soaps and believing them to be “real life”. Their impression of the soaps was generally gained through newspaper coverage, friends’ gossip, on-air promotions and headlines in soap magazines. Their impression therefore was that all of the soaps were always highly dramatic and they felt uncomfortable that such issues as incest, violence, crime, family rifts, teenage pregnancy, murder and rape were included so regularly in soap storylines.

*“It’s not that these things don’t happen in real life, it’s more that they make it seem that things like that happen every day of the week in every street in Britain”  
(Female, BC1, Non-viewers, Non-parents, 40+, Brighton)*

They felt concerned that, given so many soaps in the schedule, not one of them promoted good behaviour, happy family life, achievement or sacrifice.

*“It’s all so depressing, people shouting at one another, no-one seems to like one another, they’re always arguing”  
(Male, C2D, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, Eldest Child under 11, Renfrewshire)*

They tended to be very confused about their appeal to so many people given their perceived misery.

*“I’m not really sure why I watch them anymore they are always so depressing.”  
(Mothers, Eldest Child Under 10, C2D, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, Oakham)*

*“Everything is always miserable, it just goes on and on and you don’t see anything positive happening, it’s just depressing.”  
(Mothers, Eldest Child Under 10, C2D, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, Oakham)*

Irregular viewers argued that the soaps had a responsibility to highlight more of the negative implications of bad behaviour or an issue in a much more explicit and “horrifying” way than they currently do.

*“They should show the effects of drugs on people... show dead bodies with a syringe. At least they’d have to think about it then”  
(Male, C2D, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, Non-parents, 40+, Brighton)*

Even this second group however, were reluctant to argue that their worry was that children would be exposed to inappropriate language, sex or violence. Rather their argument was that it was incredibly sad that life had become so dangerous. They felt that the soaps not only reflected that but that they were including it far too routinely and that, therefore, the real insidiousness of soap plot lines was in promoting bad behaviour and misery as ‘normal’ or ‘real’ life.

*“I switch them on every now and then, but on EastEnders in particular, it’s just so miserable, you switch it straight back over”  
(Fathers, C2D, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, Eldest Child 11 or under, Renfrewshire)*

## Views about particular soap operas

### **EastEnders**

*EastEnders* was almost always most heavily criticised for what was described as interminably miserable characters and depressing plot lines. Most believed the soap portrayed aggressive and bad behaviour as the norm, but also that there was little to like or laugh about.

*“EastEnders is a London thing - they are much more aggressive there.”*  
(*Mothers, Eldest Child 11+ , C2D, Soap Fans, Newcastle*)

*“All I am saying is they are not out to make the world a better place. They are going for the ratings.”*  
(*Non-parent Women, 20-40, C2D, Soap Fans, Bangor*)

Much of the harshest criticism of *EastEnders* came from irregular viewers. These viewers' knowledge of the soap plots was mostly built up via on-air promotions, newspaper stories and headlines in soap magazines. Naturally these sources would not reflect the whole range of storylines in a soap at any one time, but rather highlight the dramatic, thus giving irregular viewers the impression that many more dramatic storylines are being portrayed than is the case.

### **Coronation Street**

*Coronation Street* – although also considered to be guilty of the over-dramatisation of social issues within episodes – was judged to be much more lighthearted and funny, and therefore not threatening in the way *EastEnders* was.

*“At least you know you're going to get a laugh on Corrie.”*  
(*Mothers, Eldest Child Under 10, C2D, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, Oakham*)

### **Emmerdale**

*Emmerdale* was felt to be a 'warm up' soap, one which was trying to mimic the drama of the main two soaps, but not a worry, since it was assumed that the audience knew what the soap was trying to do, and that it was based in a small, close-knit farming community.

*“It used to be Emmerdale Farm didn't it, and then they decided to make it more like the other two”*  
(*Male, C2D, Non-parent, 40+, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, London*)

### **Soap drama serials**

*Holby City, The Bill* and *Casualty* were seen to be much more story-led, and dramatic in a justifiable context. As a result, they tended not to be included in the 'soap' criticisms.

*“Casualty shows terrible things, they are really awful but they still make you feel there is hope.”*  
(*Mothers, Eldest Child Under 10, C2D, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, Oakham*)

## **Australian soaps**

*Home and Away* and *Neighbours* were felt to be soaps aimed at children, and therefore much more heavily controlled than the other soaps. Participants argued that these soaps would probably handle controversial issues (teenage pregnancy, abortion, violence in the home etc), but given they were broadcast so early in the evening, the 'issue' would only appear occasionally, and would be handled appropriately.

## 1.5 Attitudes to regulation

### Knowledge of current regulatory situation

Almost all adult respondents were aware of the watershed, and the general feeling was that a watershed was beneficial and necessary, and that television output should be regulated before it.

However, there was much criticism of programme-makers generally and their motives. Respondents argued that programme makers would always try to make a situation much more dramatic in order to try to increase ratings.

*“These people will always try it on, it’s what they do, they go for ratings”  
(Male, C2D, Parents of Children 11+, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, London)*

Everyone within the sample felt it would be very helpful to have a more public debate about regulation generally. They were aware of the changing nature of how, where and when TV programmes were watched, but thought a public debate ought to be promoted by the regulator. They suspected that this debate was not taking place because the programme makers didn’t want it to take place. Few viewers had a clear idea of who the regulator was, and more importantly, how it worked to try to maintain current standards.

There was a strong consensus that “someone” needs to keep a very careful eye on what programme-makers are doing, and that the “someone” needed to be powerful, viewer-oriented and have real sanctions at their disposal. But respondents were very unclear about who the regulator would be.

*“There must be someone who watches what they’re doing. Is there?”  
(Female, BC1, Non-viewers, Non-parent, 40+, Renfrewshire)*

The general perception was that all programmes were pre-checked: that someone working for the regulator watched all the programmes before they were broadcast to make sure they had no unsuitable content. Thus when participants saw something onscreen that surprised them, or which seemed to have crossed the border of what had been allowed in the past, they tended to assume that it had been formally ratified.

*“When I saw Les Battersby (pull up his zip) I thought, Oh God, is that allowed now, what else are we going to see?”  
(Women, BC1, Non-viewers, Non-parent, 40+, Brighton)*

Thus, most had some concerns a) about the identity and specifically the power of the regulator (particularly in the face of the resources and influence of the media industry), and b) that the line should not be continually redrawn on a programme by programme basis. Part of the reason behind this worry was a lack of clarity about the current rules.

There was little spontaneous mention of Ofcom or the legacy regulators. Respondents talked rather of Mary Whitehouse – and talked of her with some nostalgia.

*“No one would listen to her now... She might have been mad but you need someone like her...a real person...someone to make you stop and think about it.”  
(Mothers, Eldest Child Under 10, C2D, Mix of Attitudes to Soaps, Oakham)*

First and foremost, she was perceived to have raised the topic of what was allowed on television, and why, and thus not only provoked a debate, but kept that debate in the public domain. Second, she was felt to give the ‘ordinary viewer’ a voice. Further, it was felt that she kept the regulators, broadcasters and programme-makers on their toes, and made sure that they had to think about the influence of their plot lines on young people as well as the ratings.

*“She was always in the news, and at least they had to be careful about what they were doing”  
(Fathers, C2D, Mixed Attitudes to Soaps, Eldest child 11+, London)*

### **Desire for more active use of the existing system of regulation**

Rather than being unhappy with current regulation, respondents tended to want more clarity and involvement:

- a) to be clear about who was regulating and with what rules;
- b) to be involved in the debate about the appropriateness of pre-watershed content;
- c) for the line that had been drawn currently to be held, and held absolutely.

All adults and children felt this ‘holding the line’ was the central regulatory issue in soap terms, and that adhering to points a - c above would make the planning of viewing much easier for parents of children of all ages. For most adults this was a central point, since parents were judged to be the crucial influence on, and decision maker in relation to, children.

# Appendix A: the sample

Three different groups were included in the sample : adults (including parents), young people, and professional carers.

The interviews and groups were carried out in early August 2004.

## 1. Adult sample

The adult sample was designed to cover a cross-section of viewers, including people who were not soap watchers and people without children living in the home, as well as parents with children living at home and soap fans. The emphasis of the sample was on soap viewers and parents. The sample was split by demographics, sex, presence of children in the household, and age of the eldest child in the household. The adult sample for the research was structured as follows :

	BC1		C2D	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Eldest child 10 or under	Mixed group	Mixed group	Mixed group	Soap fans
Eldest child 11+	Soap fans	Mixed group	Soap fans	Non-viewers
'Non-parent' 20-40	X	Mixed group	Soap fans	X
'Non-parent' 40+	Non-viewers	X	X	Mixed group

Each group had around 8 respondents, which meant that we spoke with around 96 adults. Locations were spread throughout the UK - Swansea, Poole, London, Harlow, Oakham, Newcastle, Renfrewshire & Bangor (Northern Ireland).

## 2. Young people

One of the most interesting elements when interviewing young people and children is that they tend to talk about regulation being something that's good "for younger people", and to talk about its appropriateness for people slightly younger than themselves. They are, however, much closer to the experience of being a child watching television than all adults, and are often very useful participants in such research. However, we felt that it would be difficult to interview young people under 14 as they tend to be very defensive and claim the right to watch what they want – particularly pre-watershed. The focus of this research is also more concerned with worries about them and how those worries should be addressed via regulation, rather than what they might be influenced by on soaps per se. We therefore concentrated on 14-18 year olds.

Research amongst young people took the form of friendship pairs, and was structured as follows:

	BC1		C2D	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
14/15 (Year 10)	Both with YS Neutral/ don't watch soaps			1 with YS 1 without Fans of soaps
15/16 (Year 11)		1 with YS 1 without Fans	Both with YS Neutral/ don't watch soaps	
16/17 at college		Both with YS Neutral/ don't watch soaps	1 with YS 1 without Fans of soaps	
17/18 at work	1 with YS 1 without Fans of soaps			Both with YS Neutral/ don't watch soaps

YS = younger sibling(s)

A total of 16 young people were interviewed, and again the interviews were spread throughout the UK - London, Oakham, Newcastle, Renfrewshire & Bangor.

Across the sample of young people and adults, a split of terrestrial-only and subscription television viewers was included, as well as a representation of those with internet access at home. All were asked to complete a viewing and activity diary in the week leading up to the research group or interview. Adults were asked to include their children's viewing and young people were asked to include the activities and viewing of their younger sibling (if appropriate). The aim of the diary was to get them thinking about what they were doing and watching in the late afternoon/ early evening. They were also asked to fill out a house diagram detailing what kinds of connections they had, and where, in their homes.

### 3. Professional carers

Finally, professionals who work closely with children were included in order to evaluate how those dealing with children outside the family, and more vulnerable children, view the whole issue of a 'safe environment' for television viewing and its regulatory requirements.

A small sample of 2 teachers (1 teaching in a primary school and 1 teaching in a secondary school), and two social workers responsible for supporting families were included in the sample. They were interviewed in Swansea, Poole and Harlow.

# Part 2: Quantitative research

## 2.1 Introduction

Ofcom's purpose in this quantitative survey was to place any concerns felt about pre-watershed material within a wider context, in order to ascertain the relative strength of opinion about pre-watershed television in comparison to other media forms. We wanted to know which media were of most concern, and which age-range of children were felt to be most at risk.

We also wanted to know in more detail the types of concern felt about pre-watershed television, and so asked viewers to choose from a selection of possible concerns about pre-watershed material such as news, soap operas and music videos (the latter an issue raised by our qualitative research).

Finally, we asked a couple of questions to ascertain – in broad terms – where people felt responsibility should lie for ensuring children did not see inappropriate content, and asked parents about their own policing habits for both pre- and post-watershed content.

We were particularly interested in comparing responses firstly between parents with children in the home, and adults without children under 17 at home (classified for the sake of brevity as “non-parents”), and secondly between people with different attitudes to soap operas. To this end, 35% of the sample were parents; and 26% of the overall sample were categorised as soap-watchers, 45% as soap-neutrals, and 30% as soap-avoiders, according to their responses to a set of segmentation questions (see Appendix B).

We asked a sample of over 2,000 adults aged 15+ a series of questions via in-home face-to-face interviews<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> Capibus weekly omnibus, fieldwork carried out 13-19 August 2004. Unweighted base of 2185 adults aged 15+.



## 2.2 Which media are of most concern?

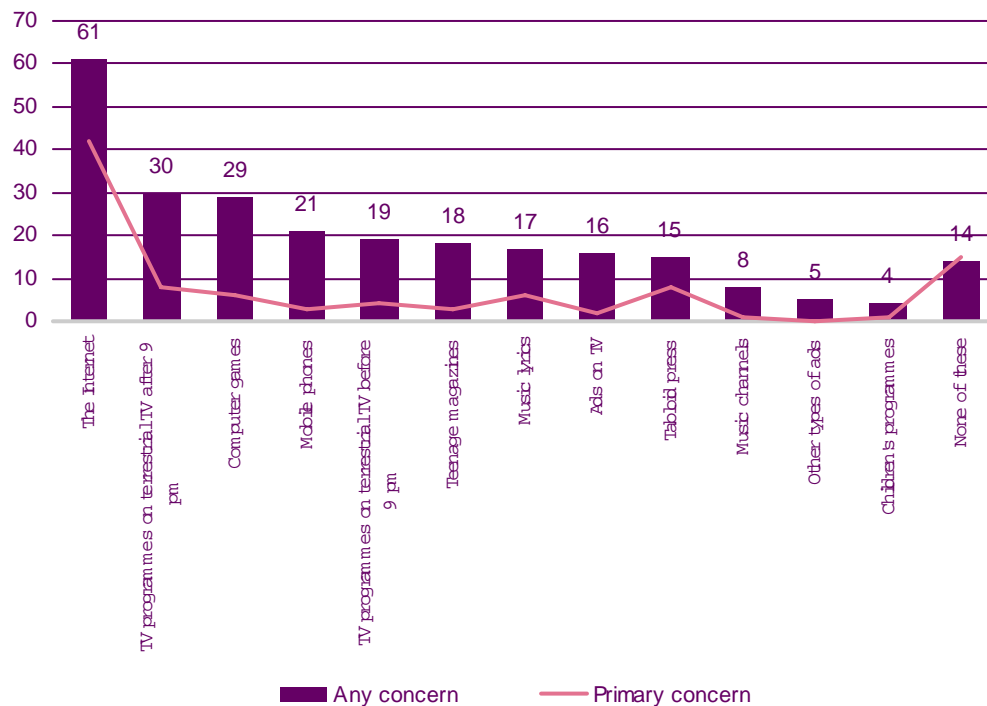
We asked respondents to tell us “which media you are concerned about children being exposed to”, giving them a list of media types (see figure 1). They could pick more than one, but were asked to choose them in order of concern to them, and were reminded that they did not need to pick all (or any) of the prompts.

**Figure 1: Concern over types of media content (%)**

“Please could you tell me which media, if any, you are concerned about children being exposed to”

Base: all adults aged 15+

Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



As figure 1 shows, most concern is reserved for the Internet, both as the uppermost concern in people’s minds (“primary concern”) and also more generally as part of a list of concerns (“any concern”).

Pre-watershed television content comes fifth in the list of general concerns about media content (19%) and sixth in the list of primary concerns (4%).

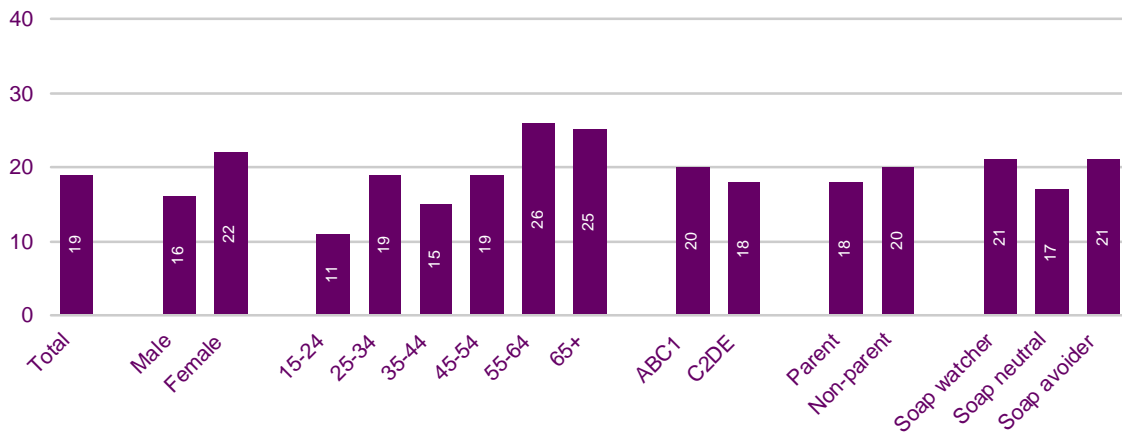
The level of concern over pre-watershed television content varies, albeit slightly, by sex, age of respondent, and “soap status”, as figure 2 indicates. Interestingly, while those neutral to soaps are less inclined to express any concern over pre-watershed content, both soap fans *and* soap avoiders, in this instance, are inclined to express some concern.

It is of note that parents and non-parents have a similar amount of concern over pre-watershed TV content. Where they differ is over the internet, music lyrics and music channels, about which parents are more concerned than non-parents.

**Figure 2: Concern over pre-watershed programmes (%)**

Base: all adults aged 15+, by sub-group

Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK

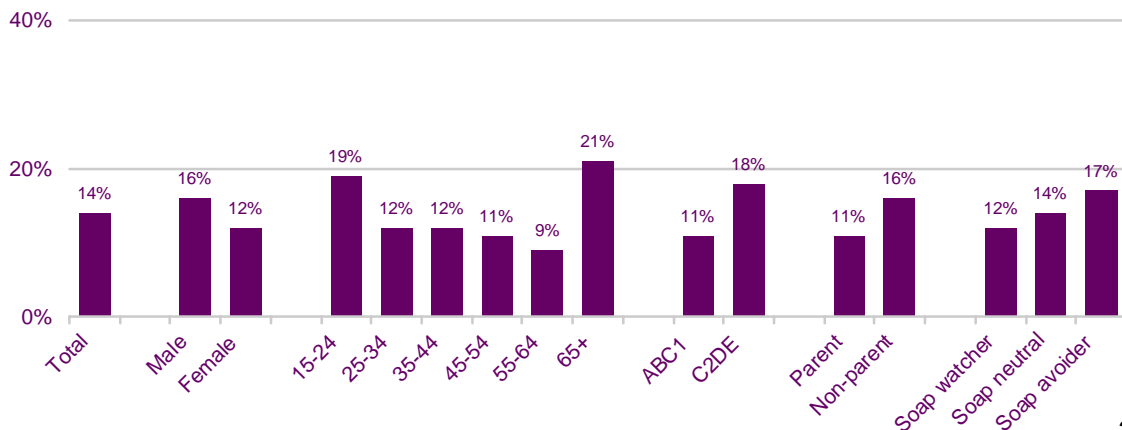


Overall, 14% of our sample expressed no concern about any of the forms of media listed. Absence of concern about any media content varies by sex, age, social grade, and parental status, as figure 3 shows. Men are more likely to express no concern (16%), as are 15-24s (19%) and the over-65s (21%), C2DEs (18%), those without children under 17 in the household (described for brevity as “non-parents” (16%) and soap avoiders (17%).

**Figure 3: Demographic breakdown of who is not concerned by media content**

Base: all adults aged 15+, by sub-group

Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK

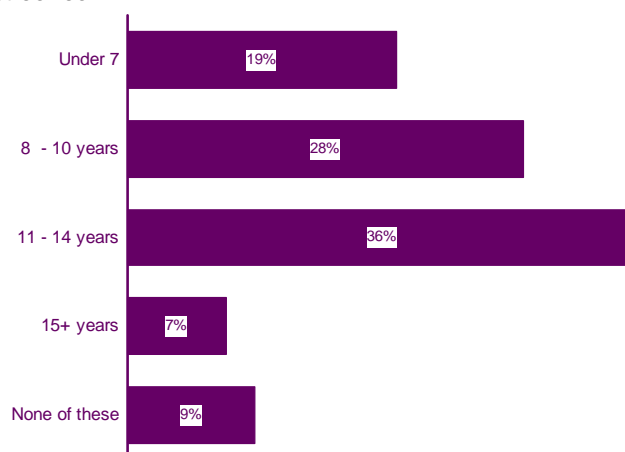


## 2.3 What age of children are felt to be at risk?

We asked all respondents “in general, which age group of children are you most concerned about being exposed to unsuitable television or media content?” Respondents were allowed to choose only one age-group – or say that none of these were of concern. As figure 4 shows, most concern was expressed about those aged 11-14 (36%).

**Figure 4: Age-group of most concern**

Base: all adults aged 15+  
Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



There are some differences by demographic group. As figure 5 below shows, while male and female responses are largely similar, more men (11%) than women (7%) express no concern. The 35-44s expressed the most concern about 11-14 age group closely followed by the 55-64 and 45-54 groups. 15-34 year olds are more likely to be concerned about the under-7s (24%) than older respondents (14% of over-65s). Conversely, the over-65s are more likely to be concerned about those over 15 (11%) than younger people are. Soap watchers are likely to be more concerned by those over 15 (9%) than soap avoiders (5%).

**Figure 5: Age-group of most concern, by demographic (%)**

Base: all adults aged 15+  
Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK

	Total (%)	Male	Female	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	ABC1	C2DE	Parent	Non-parent	Soap watcher	Soap neutral	Soap avoider
Under 7	19	18	20	24	24	19	20	17	14	20	18	22	18	18	20	20
8 – 10 years	28	29	28	29	30	29	28	29	25	27	29	28	28	27	28	29
11-14 years	36	36	37	30	35	41	37	40	35	39	34	38	36	38	37	34
15+ years	7	6	7	5	3	5	8	8	11	6	8	6	7	9	7	5
None of these	9	11	7	11	7	6	8	6	15	8	10	5	11	8	8	11

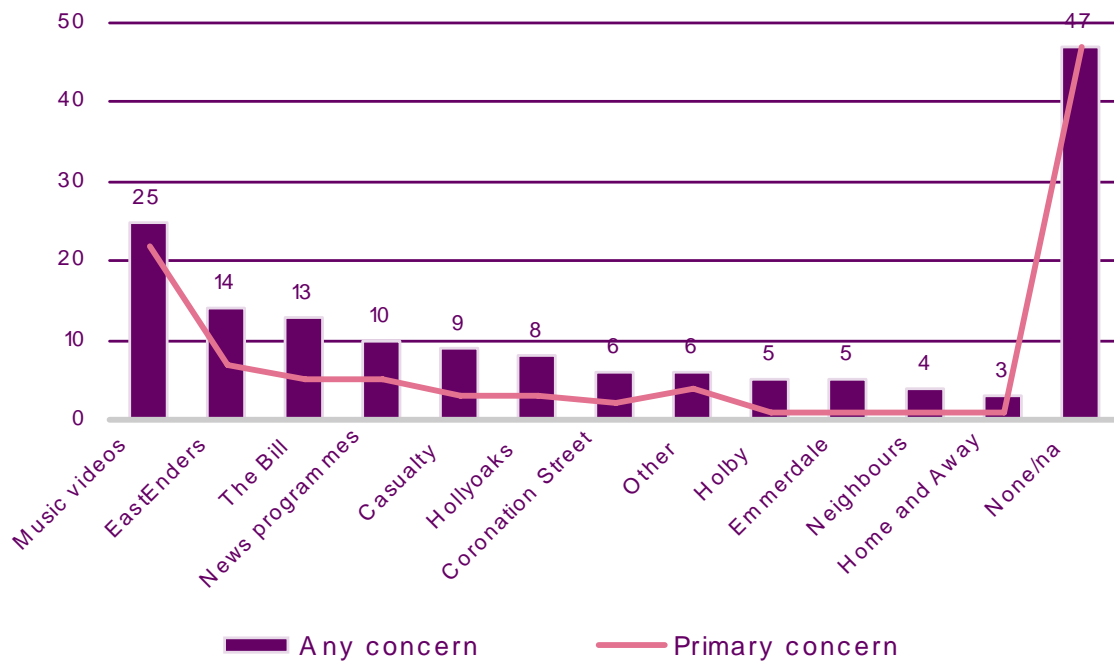
## 2.4 Levels of concern about pre-watershed content

We gave all our respondents a list of the main soap-operas and soap dramas, plus two other types of programming readily available pre-watershed – music videos (via TOTP, etc.) and News programmes. We asked them “do you tend to be concerned about children being exposed to any of these programmes or types of content?” and again reminded them that they didn’t have to choose all or any of them.

**Figure 6: Concern over types of pre-watershed TV (%)**

“Do you tend to be concerned about children being exposed to any of these programmes or types of content? Please mention the one you are most concerned about first, and so on. Only tell me about the ones you are concerned about – you don’t need to rank them all.”

Base: all adults aged 15+  
Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



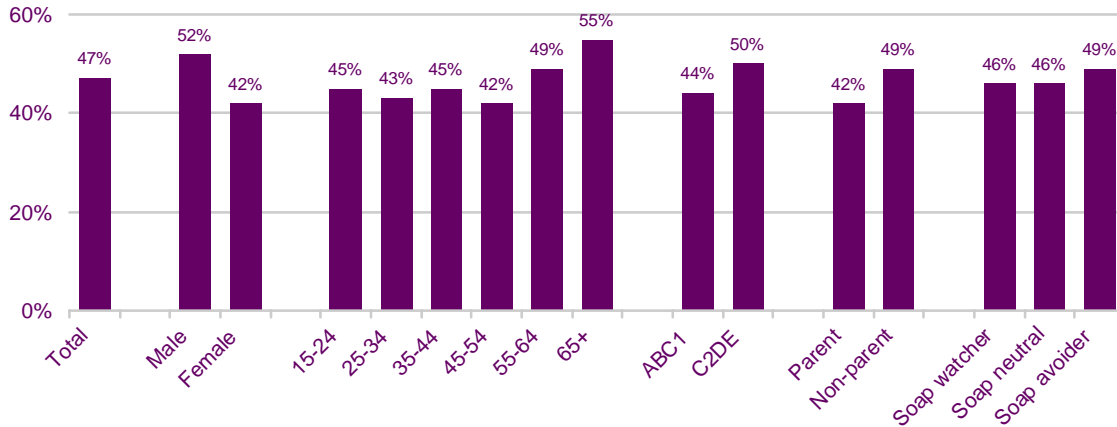
The first point to be made is that 47% of respondents did not express concern about any of these areas – nearly half the sample (see figure 7 for a breakdown of those that are not concerned). This can be compared to 14% of the overall sample which did not feel concerned about any of the general media content. As stated above, the locus of concern for most people is the Internet, rather than TV content.

**Figure 7: Breakdown of those not concerned by pre-watershed content**

“Do you tend to be concerned about children being exposed to any of these programmes or types of content?”

Base: all adults aged 15+, by sub-group

Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



As figure 6 shows, music videos are of most concern overall (25%), followed by *EastEnders* (14%), *The Bill* (13%), the News (10%), *Casualty* (9%) and *Hollyoaks* (8%).

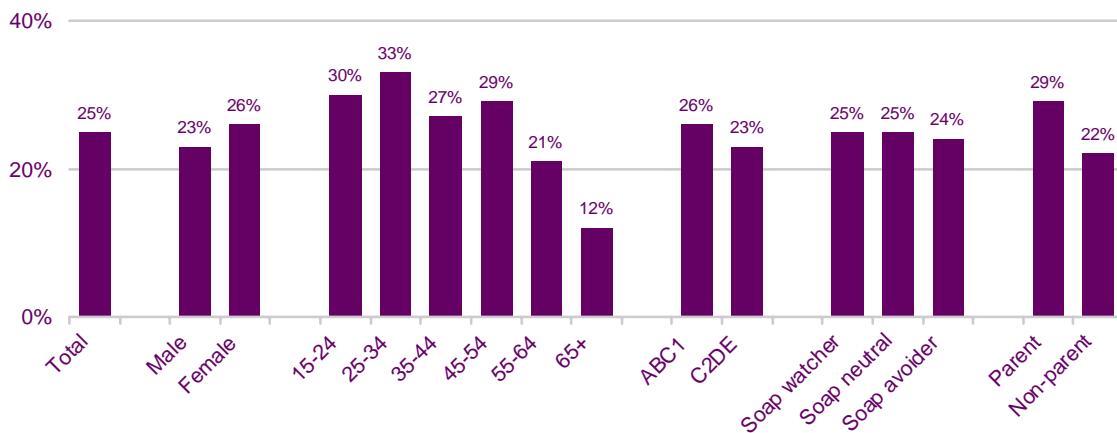
Within these concerns, again there are demographic and opinion variations to highlight. Unsurprisingly, music videos (see figure 8) are of far more concern to younger respondents than the over 65s, given their respective likely degrees of exposure to such material. Parents, too are more likely to be concerned about them (29%) than non-parents (22%). Those that are concerned about under-7s are more likely to be worried about music videos (29%) than those concerned about older age-ranges, for example the over-15s (24%).

**Figure 8: Concern over music videos**

“Do you tend to be concerned about children being exposed to any of these programmes or types of content?”

Base: all adults aged 15+, by sub-group

Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



Fourteen per cent of the overall sample expressed concern about *EastEnders*. Concern was more likely to be apparent among women (16%) than men (12%); those over 45 (16-18%) than those aged 15-34 (10-11%), ABC1s (16%) than C2DEs (12%) and, interestingly, non-parents (15%) than parents (12%) and soap avoiders (19%) than soap watchers (11%) (see figure 9).

**Figure 9: concern over *EastEnders***

“Do you tend to be concerned about children being exposed to any of these programmes or types of content?”

Base: all adults aged 15+, by sub-group

Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



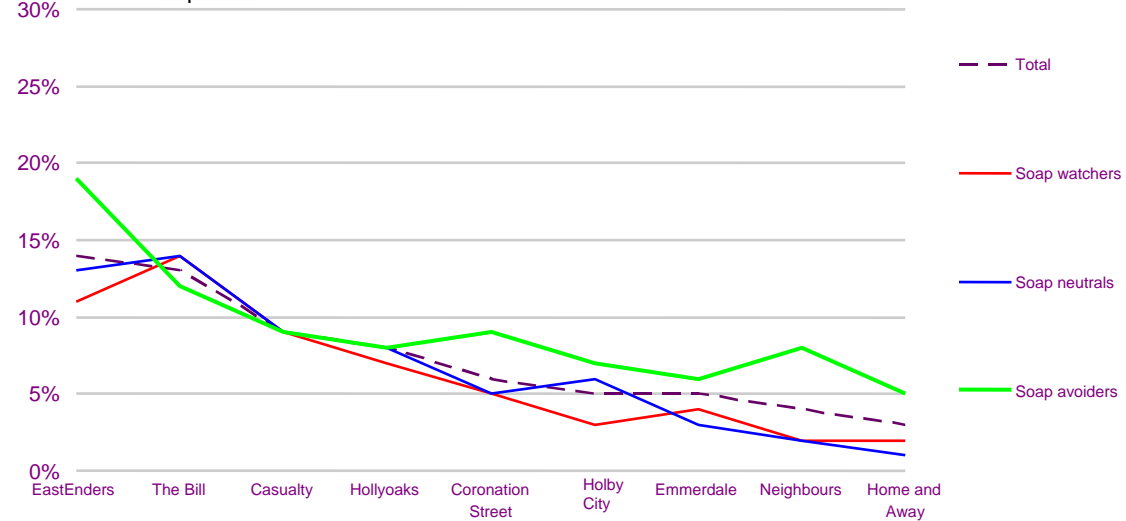
Soap avoiders were as concerned about pre-watershed content in general as soap watchers (21%). However, across a number of the responses about specific soap operas it is the soap avoiders who display most concern, as figure 10 shows.

**Figure 10: Concern about soaps**

“Do you tend to be concerned about children being exposed to any of these programmes/types of content?”

Base: all adults aged 15+, by “soap status”

Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



With parents, the picture is more varied. Non-parents display slightly more concern over *EastEnders* (see figure 9), but for other traditional soaps such as *Coronation Street*, *Hollyoaks* and *Emmerdale*, levels of concern were similar to those of parents. That said,

parents expressed more concern than non-parents over music videos (29%:22%), the News (14%:8%), *Casualty* (12%:8%) and *Holby City* (8%:4%).

## 2.5 Types of concern about pre-watershed content

After asking people which pre-watershed TV programmes they found of concern, if any, we then asked those with concerns to say which *types* of concern they had over the programme. Again, they were reminded that they did not need to rank all the suggested possibilities.

The list of possible concerns they were given was as follows, and was informed by the issues raised in our qualitative research:

- |   |                                       |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| Celebrities setting a bad example         | Sexual promiscuity                    |
| Glamorises or normalises drug-taking      | Bad language                          |
| Glamorises or normalises drinking alcohol | Physical violence                     |
| Portrayal of homosexuality                | Antisocial messages                   |
| Sexually provocative behaviour            | No real consequences to bad behaviour |

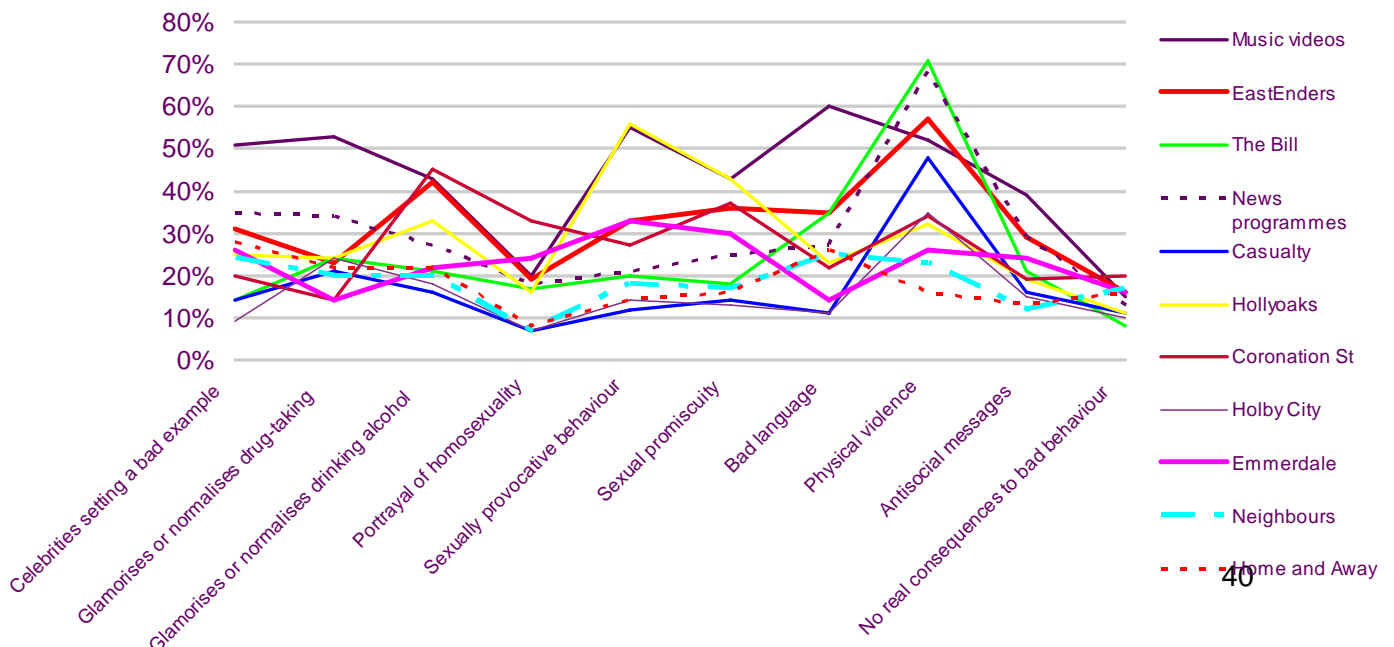
Figure 11 provides a summary breakdown of aggregated responses by programme. The percentages relate to *those respondents who were concerned about a given programme*, rather than all the survey sample, and it is for this reason that the figures appear high. In other words, they reflect the views of those that are concerned about each programme, rather than the views of the sample as a whole (please refer to figure 6 for levels of concern about each programme).

**Figure 11: Types of concern over pre-watershed content (any mention)**

“Which of the following do you think applies to ....?”

Base: for each programme, those that expressed concern

Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK





These responses serve to underpin what is already known about viewers' types of concern with particular programmes.

For example, in music videos, concerned respondents (25% of the overall sample) are worried most about bad language (60%) followed by sexually provocative behaviour (55%) and the glamorisation or normalisation of drug-taking (53%).

For those concerned about EastEnders (14% of the overall sample), worries include physical violence (57%), drinking alcohol (42%), sexual promiscuity (36%) and bad language (35%).

For those concerned about The Bill (13% of the overall sample), 71% mentioned physical violence as a concern and 35% mentioned bad language.

## 2.6 Opinions about the purpose of soap operas

We gave our respondents some statements about soaps and asked them whether they agreed with them (they could agree with more than one statement). The statements were designed to polarise responses, to see the extent to which respondents defended soap operas, and for what reasons – were they seen as entertainment, a slice of real life, a vehicle for discussion of social issues, or essentially irrelevant in terms of their impact on children.

Soap operas are a good way of introducing social issues to children	30%
Children will see far worse in real life than they do on the soaps	27%
Soaps are entertaining and therefore ought to create dramatic storylines	21%
Soaps are about reality and therefore ought to be hard-hitting	11%
None of these	30%

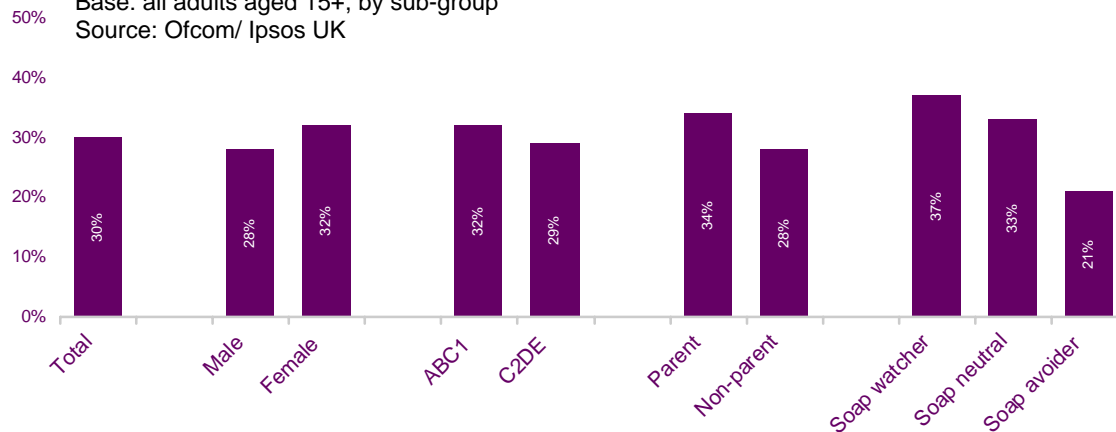
Figures 12 – 16 show the levels of agreement across demographic groups to these statements:

**Figure 12: “Soap operas are a good way of introducing social issues to children”**

“Which of the following statements do you agree with?”

Base: all adults aged 15+, by sub-group

Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



As expected, more soap watchers than avoiders are positive about the possibilities of soaps to introduce social issues to children, as are women and parents (figure 12).

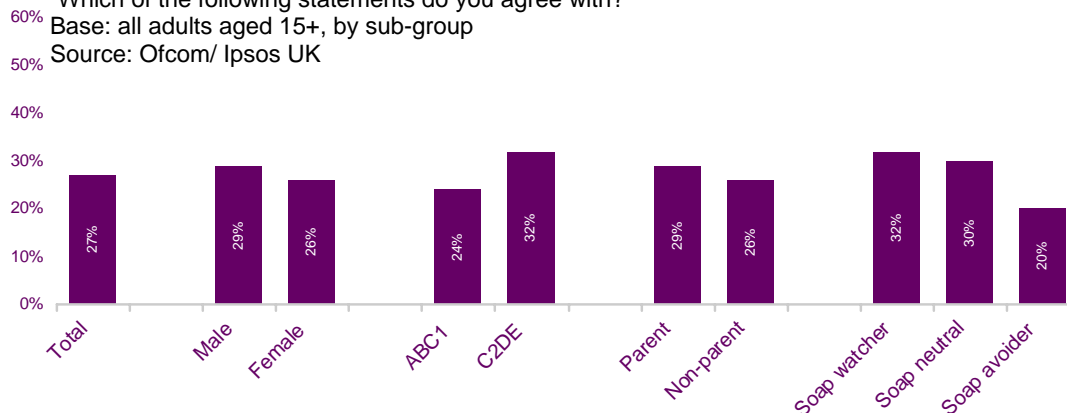
C2DEs are more likely to agree (32%) than ABC1s (24%) that children are likely to see far worse in real life (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: “Children will see far worse in real life than they do on the soaps”**

“Which of the following statements do you agree with?”

Base: all adults aged 15+, by sub-group

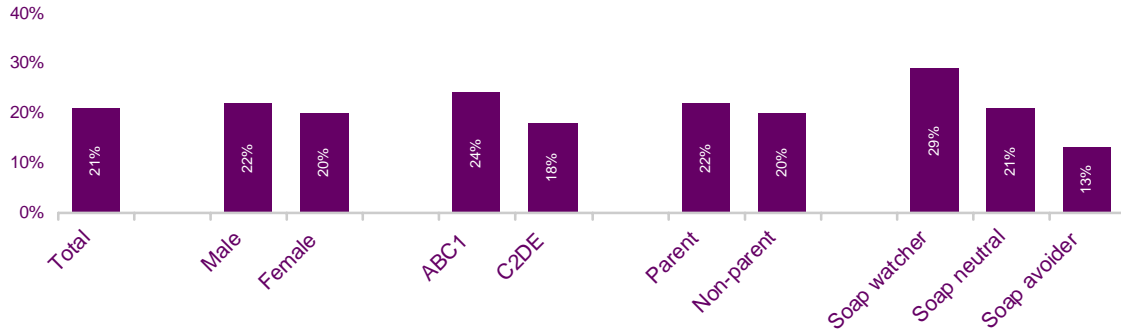
Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



More ABC1s (24%) feel that soaps ought to have dramatic storylines than C2DEs (18%), as unsurprisingly do soap watchers (see figure 14). C2DEs again are more disposed to seeing soaps as slices of life, giving them slightly more leeway to be hard-hitting (12%) than ABC1s (9%), as indicated in figure 15.

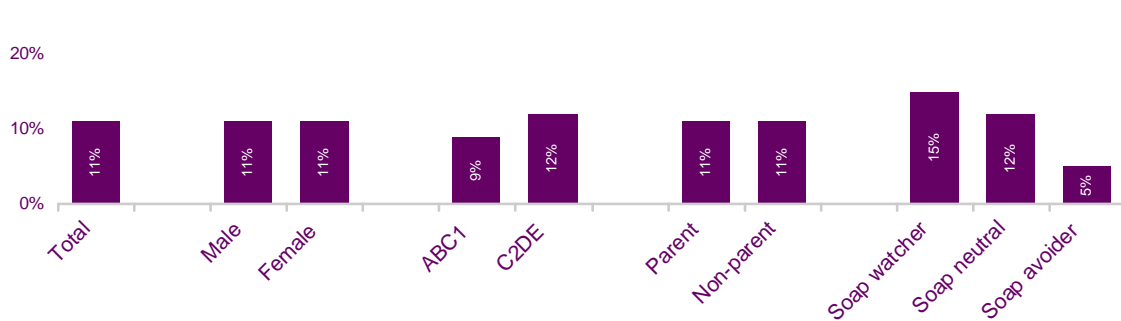
**Figure 14: “Soaps are entertaining and therefore they ought to create dramatic storylines”**

Which of the following statements do you agree with?  
 Base: all adults aged 15+, by sub-group  
 Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



**Figure 15: “Soaps are about reality and therefore ought to be hard-hitting”**

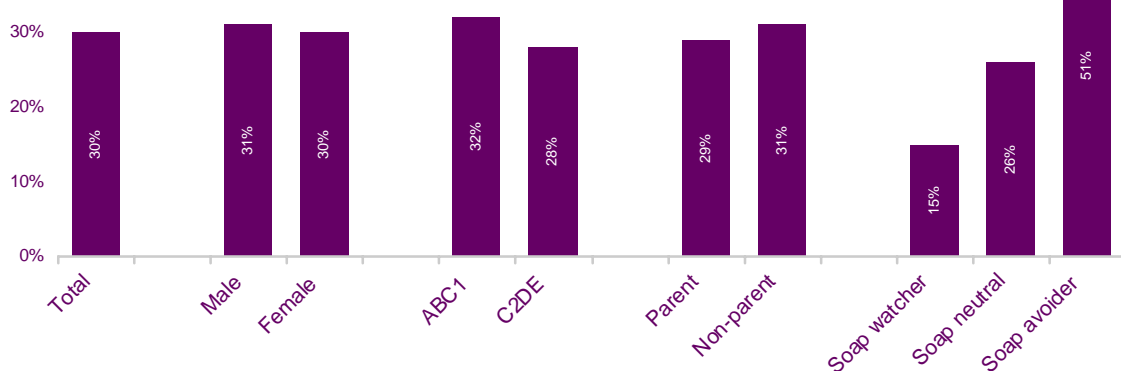
Which of the following statements do you agree with?  
 Base: all adults aged 15+, by sub-group  
 Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



Finally, soap avoiders are far more likely than soap watchers or soap neutrals to agree with none of the statements – 51% compared to 26% of soap neutrals and 15% of soap watchers (figure 16).

**Figure 16: “None of these”**

Which of the following statements do you agree with?  
 Base: all adults aged 15+, by sub-group  
 Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



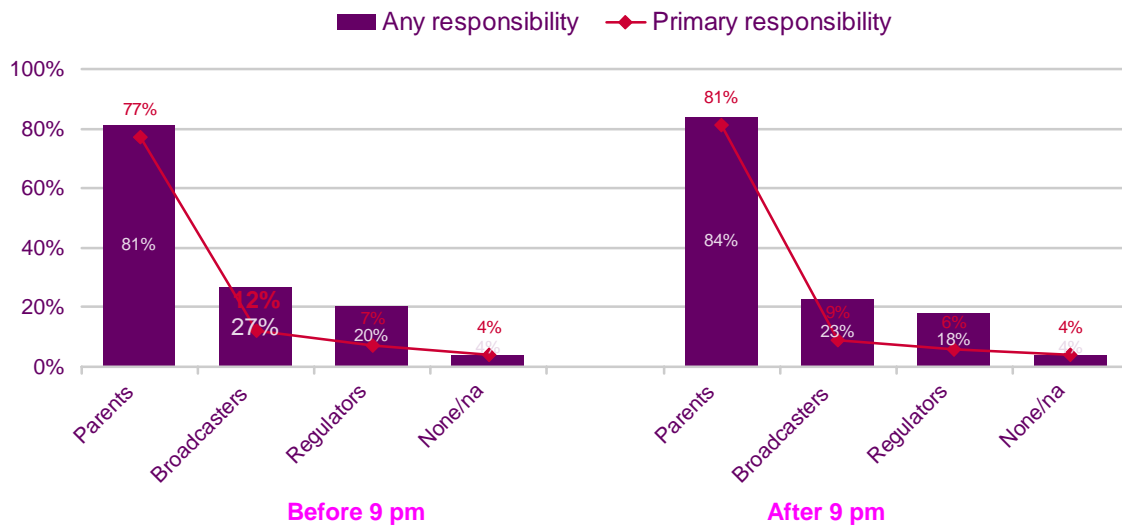
## 2.7 Views on who should be responsible

We asked our sample “who should have the responsibility for trying to make sure that children don’t see inappropriate TV content on the five main channels? If you think that more than one group should be responsible, please mention the one with the most responsibility first”.

**Figure 17: Who should have responsibility**

“Who should have the responsibility for trying to make sure that children don’t see inappropriate TV content on the five main channels? If you think that more than one group should be responsible, please mention the one with the most responsibility first”.

Base: all adults aged 15+  
Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



As figure 17 shows, the overwhelming majority of respondents felt that parents should be the most responsible, for both pre- and post-watershed programming.

There is far less call for either broadcasters or regulators to have this responsibility. This finding is likely to assume, however, that the watershed is operational, and therefore that the possibility of inappropriate content is small – as indeed our research shows overall, by nearly half the sample expressing “no concern” about pre-watershed content.

This view is shared by parents and non-parents alike. There are no differences of statistical significance between their responses.

## 2.8 Parental control of children's viewing

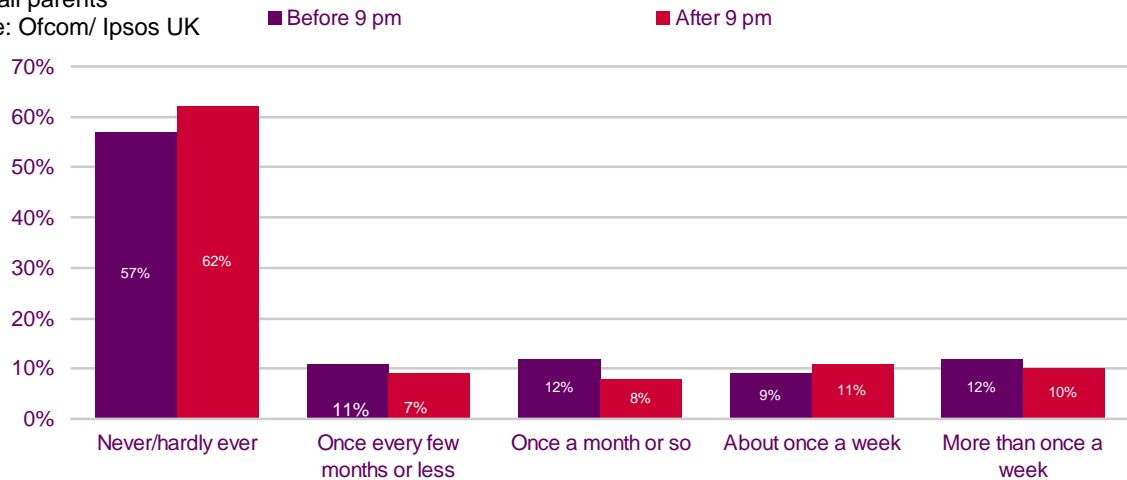
We asked the parents in our sample how frequently they did not allow a child to watch a programme because they felt it was inappropriate for them. We asked them to respond about programmes scheduled before 9 pm, and those scheduled after 9 pm.

**Figure 18**

"How often would you say you switch over or switch off when a child is watching the main terrestrial channels because you don't think the content is appropriate for them?"

Base: all parents

Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



As figure 18 shows, there is little difference in responses about programmes on either side of the watershed. While approximately 1 in 5 parents say they intervene on a weekly basis or more frequently, the vast majority say they do so less than every few months.

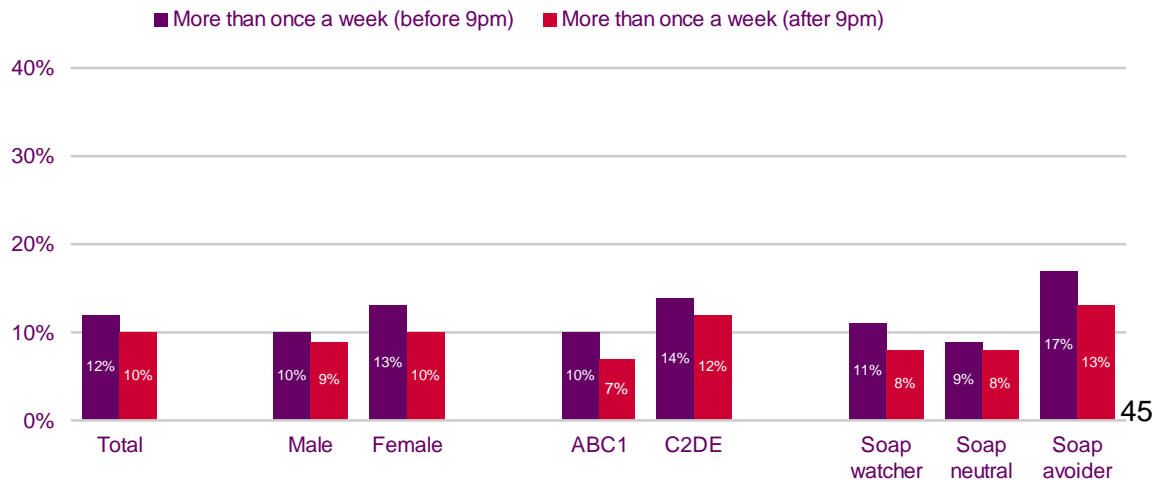
Women are more likely than men to say they intervene regularly pre-9pm, but there is little difference between the sexes after 9pm. Soap avoiders are more likely to say they intervene regularly than soap neutrals or soap fans, as are C2DEs (see figure 19).

**Figure 19: Demographics of parental control**

"How often would you say you switch over or switch off when a child is watching the main terrestrial channels because you don't think the content is appropriate for them?"

Base: all parents, by sub-group

Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



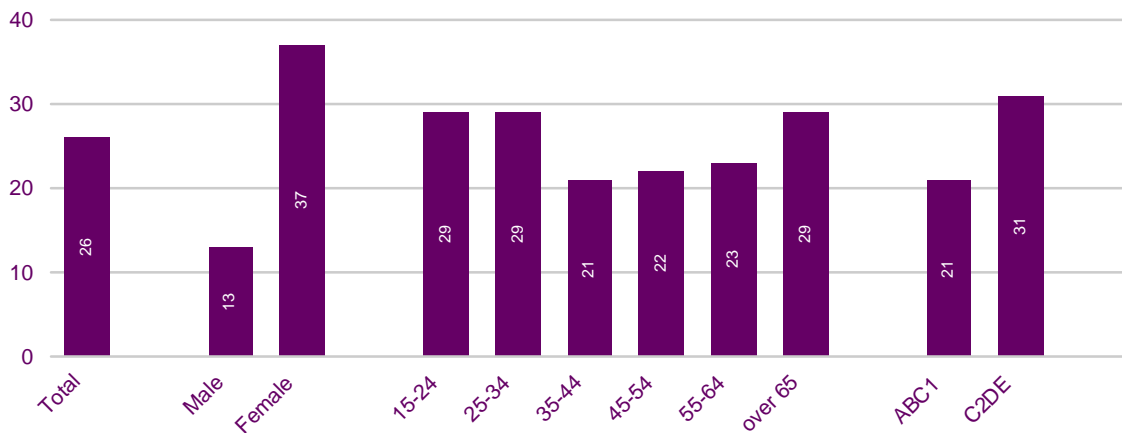
# Appendix B: Who watches soap operas

We asked respondents to pick one of five statements that best reflected their attitude to soaps, and grouped them accordingly into one of three groups – soap watchers, soap neutrals, and soap avoiders.

Soap “neutrals” form the largest base, with 45% of our sample agreeing that they either don’t mind watching soaps if they are on, or like to watch them occasionally; 30% saying that they avoid them, and 26% saying that they either “love” watching soaps or like to watch them frequently. Unsurprisingly, there are differences according to sex, age, and social grade, as figures A - C show. Women are far more likely to be soap watchers, as are C2DEs, the young and the old. On the other hand, soap avoidance varies with age, and is also heavily male-skewed.

**Figure A: Soap watchers**

Agreement with either “I like to watch soaps frequently” or “I love to watch the soaps”  
 Base: all adults aged 15+, by sub-group  
 Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



**Figure B: Soap neutrals**

Agreement with either “If a soap is on I don’t mind watching it” or “I like to watch soaps occasionally”  
 Base: all adults aged 15+, by sub-group  
 Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK



**Figure C: Soap avoiders**

Agreement with "I avoid watching soaps"

Base: all adults aged 15+, by sub-group

Source: Ofcom/ Ipsos UK

