

Highlights of [GAO-11-659](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Children's Television Act of 1990 (CTA) and related Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules restrict advertising during children's programs, whether aired by broadcast stations, cable operators, or satellite providers, and encourage broadcasters to air at least 3 hours per week of educational and informational programming for children (known as "core children's programming"). Broadcasters that certify in their license renewal application that they aired the minimum amount of core children's programming are eligible for expedited review. As requested, this report discusses (1) trends in children's programming, (2) FCC efforts to enforce the act, and (3) the extent to which parents value and use core children's programming. GAO analyzed FCC data, interviewed FCC and broadcast station officials, and conducted focus groups with parents.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FCC (1) implement a strategy to oversee cable operators' and satellite providers' compliance, (2) work with industry to develop voluntary guidelines for assessing core children's programming, and (3) implement and assess the effectiveness of additional mechanisms to inform parents about core children's programming. FCC generally concurred with GAO's recommendations and discussed planned and ongoing actions to address them.

View [GAO-11-659](#) or key components. For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or [goldsteinm@gao.gov](mailto:goldsteinm@gao.gov).

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## CHILDREN'S TELEVISION ACT

### FCC Could Improve Efforts to Oversee Enforcement and Provide Public Information

## What GAO Found

Broadcasters aired significantly more core children's programming in 2010 than in 1998, primarily because there are more broadcast channels and stations than there were then. An important source is multicasting, or the multiple channels aired by broadcasters since the digital television transition. Moreover, households increasingly rely on cable and satellite providers—to which core children's programming requirements do not apply—increasing the number of channels specifically targeted to children, but also increasing the impact of CTA and FCC's rules on advertising, which limit the duration of commercials and require their separation from children's programming on broadcast, cable, and satellite. Other media platforms, such as the Internet and MP3 players, are outside CTA's reach.

FCC's reliance on broadcasters to self-report violations of CTA when they renew their operating licenses has resulted in about 7,000 violations of the advertising or public file rules resulting in fines of almost \$3 million. The vast majority of violations were for exceeding advertising time limits. FCC has no comparable self-reporting enforcement approach to oversee cable operators' or satellite providers' compliance with these same advertising limits. Instead, FCC's oversight efforts have identified only seven violations by cable and satellite providers even though they televise much more children's programming than broadcasters. FCC has avoided developing specific standards for core children's programming or judging program content, due to free speech concerns, relying instead on a broad definition and oversight by the public. A lack of widely accepted standards to assess such programming makes it difficult for parents and broadcasters to evaluate the educational content of core children's programming, potentially leading to wide variation in its quality. In the past, FCC and the media industry have collaborated to resolve concerns about program content in other areas.

Parent focus groups were largely unaware of CTA's requirements despite FCC's public education efforts. Once informed about the act and core children's programming, focus group parents believed requirements governing such programming should be more stringent than current rules. Core children's programming is designated as such by broadcast stations, but focus group parents believed independent standards or assessments of programming should be required, and parents in all focus groups perceived broadcast station involvement in the process to be a potential conflict of interest. Parents in our focus groups stated that important aspects of children's programming were that it be educational, age appropriate, and entertaining. Focus group parents had differing views on the importance and definition of educational television, but generally agreed that child-dedicated cable networks are more trustworthy for children's programming than broadcast stations and that a gap exists in appropriate programming for school-age children.