STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
AT STONY BROOK

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

STONY BROOK, N.Y. 11790

September 13, 1974

Dr. Eleanor B. Sheldon
Social Science Research Council
605 Third Avenue
New York, New York 10016

Dear Dr. Sheldon:

Reading through the materials you sent on August 30, it has occured to me that my own statement before the Pastore subcommittee may also be of interest to you and perhaps the other participants. I am therefore enclosing a copy, in which you might particularly note the remarks on Page 5 regarding the violence index and our own work on measuring both violence and prosocial behavior.

Sincerely,

Robert M. Liebert, Ph.D.
Professor of Psychology
ans Psychiatry

RML:jn
Enclosure

Testimony of Professor Robert M. Liebert

Before The

SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE

UNITED STATES SENATE

April 4, 1974

Thank you, Senator Pastore. Reflecting on the activities taking place today, I recall your own words toward the end of the hearings held in March of 1972. At that time you observed, "...what has taken place [in the past few days] is nothing less than a scientific and cultural breakthrough...Great as this achievement is, I believe these hearings have underscored what I said at the outset--long and arduous effort is still before us."

The last two years have borne out amply both the points you made. The basic finding that viewing aggressive television entertainment can and does instigate aggressive behavior in many children has now been shown again in several new studies, using full-length commercially broadcast materials and measures of youngsters' interpersonal behavior in natural school and play settings. Likewise, recent studies have shown that children exposed to television violence also become less sensitive to real-life interpersonal aggression by others, and less willing to act cooperatively in dealing with their peers; these effects appear for many children who are in no way predisposed to act in an overtly aggressive way themselves. So the conclusions that other researchers and I placed before this Committee in March of 1972 are now, if anything, more firmly documented.

That a long and arduous effort is still before us is also as--or more--true now than two years ago. [Professor Gerbner's data illustrate that] a preponderance of programming seen by American children is still characterized by repeated displays of antisocial values and behavior. Our own observations suggest that if some improvement has been made in new network broadcasting for children, such progress is <u>not</u> paralleled by changes in

the program offerings of the independent stations. Many of the highly violent cartoons that network executives themselves recognize as likely to have an undesirable influence on the young are shown regularly and repeatedly on weekday afternoons and Saturday morning by independent stations opportunistically trying to capture the child audience away from their network competitors.

The growing role of independent stations in children's broadcasting, often beaming the most detrimental and pernicious type of shows to our youth, highlights the reality of the American television industry as a free enterprise, private business. Let us be candid about the fact that a significant conflict of interest has existed between people concerned about children and people concerned about profit--those who make, and sell commercial programming. Whatever that conflict has meant for the parties involved, the irate social scientists and defensive broadcasters who appear here, it is clear that the price exacted by our continued failure to address the problem of antisocial content in television has been paid by American children, who will be the citizens of tomorrow.

These problems, I think, are now familiar to us all. If we are wise, the time for rehashing and debating them has come to an end. The pressing need is no longer the preliminary step of identifying the issues and agreeing that a serious difficulty exists; the time has come to work out and follow through on solutions to these problems. It is our own efforts in this direction that I would like to report here today.

One project has involved a collaboration with organizations that sponsor and pay for children's programming. Funded by grants from General Foods and General Mills, Drs. Rita Poulos, Eli Rubinstein and I, together

with colleagues at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, have been pursuing a research effort aimed at investigating the positive influence that television can have on youngsters' social behavior. This work has proceeded on several fronts, and time does not permit me to describe all of them to you. Let me instead provide a single example aimed at demonstrating that television can and, in certain instances, already has had a positive effect. We were able to obtain, through the generous cooperation of the Wrather Corporation of Hollywood, California, a set of program synopses for the Lassie series. From these we selected two shows, comparable in as many respects as possible but differing in that only one conveyed, in the course of the natural story line, positive examples of altruistic behavior by the principal characters. In a major experiment we just completed, children viewed the entirety of the prosocial Lassie program, or the neutral Lassie program (that is, the one without the altruistic example), or a pleasant but neutral program from the series, the Brady Bunch. Thereafter, following usual research procedures, we created a special opportunity for each child in our study to choose between acting in a selfish way or exhibiting altruistic behavior comparable to that displayed in the prosocial Lassie program.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the effects of the prosocial example embedded in an entertainment context were striking indeed. A single exposure to the prosocial Lassie show produced an almost 100% increase in children's altruistic behavior. Thus, prosocial television examples foster prosocial behavior just as antisocial television examples foster antisocial behavior. The significance of such a demonstration, we feel, can hardly be overstated. It illustrates quite unambiguously that a series can be

highly successful while, at the same time, conveying social lessons that most of us would judge beneficial to our society. What is more, the demonstration speaks to television's yet untapped benefits that could be realized in the future.

The demonstrated positive effects of some shows from the Lassie series is doubtless paralleled by similar effects of some of the new network programs for children, about which I am sure their representatives will tell you today and tomorrow. To what degree do other shows on television today contain such prosocial examples? Do they occur concurrently with violence and aggression, or appear in entirely different programs? Can prosocial episodes balance out the effects of antisocial example, either within a given show or across a full diet of programming? These vital questions will not be answered--and may even be obscured--by the use of a violence index alone to determine the quality of television our children are viewing. The frequency with which prosocial examples appear on television must also be determined if we are to paint a complete and accurate picture of the medium. My colleagues and I have developed such a system, for more completely profiling the content of television, and are presently seeking private funds to employ it over the next three years; preliminary work already suggests though, that violence serves quite a different purpose in programming, depending upon the presence or absence of other, more positive themes.

We also feel strongly that coding and profiling is not enough. The effects of the content must be understood, and good use must be made of that knowledge.

Our own basic research has shed considerable light on how both violent and prosocial televised examples exert their influence on the young. Indeed, the underlying natural process of observational learning is identical in both

cases. With our understanding of this process, we are now moving on another front, by seeking opportunities to make more direct use of our accumulated knowledge to foster the development of new programming for children. The shows that we envision will and must entertain children, but their psychological and social by-products would be designed to be positive rather than negative ones.

Our first opportunity came through United Methodist Communications, when Mr. Ben T. Logan broached to us the plan of using our knowledge and research skills to develop 30-second public service spots for children. These commercial length messages were to have a highly-focused aim: to convey to children that in many daily conflict situations a naked display of force and aggression serves neither party, while cooperative solutions that benefit both parties often can be found.

To be effective, such messages must be presented to the child at his own level of understanding; they must be attended to carefully in a natural entertainment viewing context; and children must be willing to act upon them later. The ingredients most likely to produce such an outcome are quite well understood from the basic research we have conducted. Armed with this knowledge, and supported by a grant for research from Lilly Endowment, Inc., of Indianapolis, our work has proceeded. As a model for the future, two central ideas lie at its heart. First, we believe that successful production will require a close collaboration between creative people (writers, producers, and directors) and researchers. Here we are fortunate to work with Gene and Ron Weed, of The Film Factory, whose creative talents were essential to our enterprise. Our second main conviction is that direct testing of programming should be conducted during

the formative stages of development, when problems can still be detected and improvement is still possible, and again after the product is completed but before it goes on the air.

To illustrate the process briefly, let me describe the work that went into one of our spots, The Swings, which has now been completed and will be released later this month. The opening scene shows a boy and a girl running to reach the one vacant swing on a playground, each claiming first rights. After a moment during which battle seems inevitable, it occurs to one of the youngsters that they should take turns--and he backs up the good will of this solution by adding that the other child should go first. Each of the children is then seen swinging joyfully through the air with the help of the other.

Does The Swings work? The final round of research conducted to answer this question involved three separate probes. First, a sample of children ranging in age from 4 to 7 years was shown The Swings, an alternative spot that we had made earlier, and a commercial message with a generally similar story line. Highly trained child psychologists interviewed the children individually after the showing of each of these programs, and determined how well each was understood. The results, shown in Figure 2, are very clear. The message and setting of The Swings was uniformly understood by children after a single exposure; the alternative spot we had created was not, and neither was an expensive and widely shown commercial spot which we had videotaped off the air. Such an outcome demonstrates, we feel, that a great deal of children's programming is not delivering the kind of message intended, because the opportunity for determining in advance its potential effects are simply not capitalized upon by broadcasters.

Comprehension of televised material is not enough, though. A determination must also be made as to whether or not the program contains those ingredients which will attract children when seen in a natural entertainment context. Toward this end, we invited children to watch television in a natural viewing situation and, as they did, a videotape camera recorded the child's facial reactions. (This has turned out to be a very powerful way to measure interest, while letting children view in a den-like setting, without interruption, as they would at home.) We took The Swings and several commercial messages and imbedded them in two different entertainment programs, just where the original commercials had appeared. We videotaped each child's reaction to these composite programs and then, using careful measures of attention from the child's face, trained raters were able to determine how much attention was paid to each bit of programming. Some of our results are shown in Figure 3, from which it can be seen that The Swings, the product of careful formative research, fared much better in the practical matter of holding audience attention than did either of the commercial spots against which we compared it. What is more, we can locate exactly where each of the other spots failed. Notice on the graph, for example, that commercial #2 held the attention of the girls but, in comparison, was strikingly ineffective for boys. We presume, of course, that the producers of this message did indeed want to reach a male audience, but lacked understanding of how to effectively do so.

The third and final question which we had to ask about The Swings is whether or not children would accept the underlying example as a guide for their own behavior. To test this, we had youngsters observe either The Swings or commercial spots for a comparable period of time, and then put them in an actual interpersonal situation with other youngsters where

the alternatives were either to compete unproductively or to cooperate to optimize one's own and one's playmate's opportunities. This situation, then, recreated the kind of dilemma seen in The Swings; we could now ask whether this brief television experience could actually influence children's interactions with others. The results speak for themselves. As seen in Figure 4, children who had viewed The Swings engaged in successful positive social interaction 2 to 3 times as much as the youngsters who were not exposed to the positive message.

The work I have described today illustrates that some existing programs may foster positive social development in the young, and also that new programming can be made that uses the same basic techniques. Significantly, such programming need not be inconsistent with the broadcaster's goal of entertaining and competing successfully in the commercial arena; this is illustrated clearly in our studies of audience interest. The interplay of research and creative broadcasting can be a model for future programs, and without great expense (our research budget for The Swings was only about 10% of the total production costs). Broadcasters might even benefit financially, inasmuch as audience-tested programs are more likely to be commercially successful than those created on guessing alone. Most important, though, our children and our society can benefit from the wide implementation of a model for children's television programming that relieves the problem of antisocial lessons on television and goes a step beyond to foster positive human interaction as well. This path has now been shown to be a viable possibility; whether it becomes an actuality will depend on all of us.

FIGURE 1

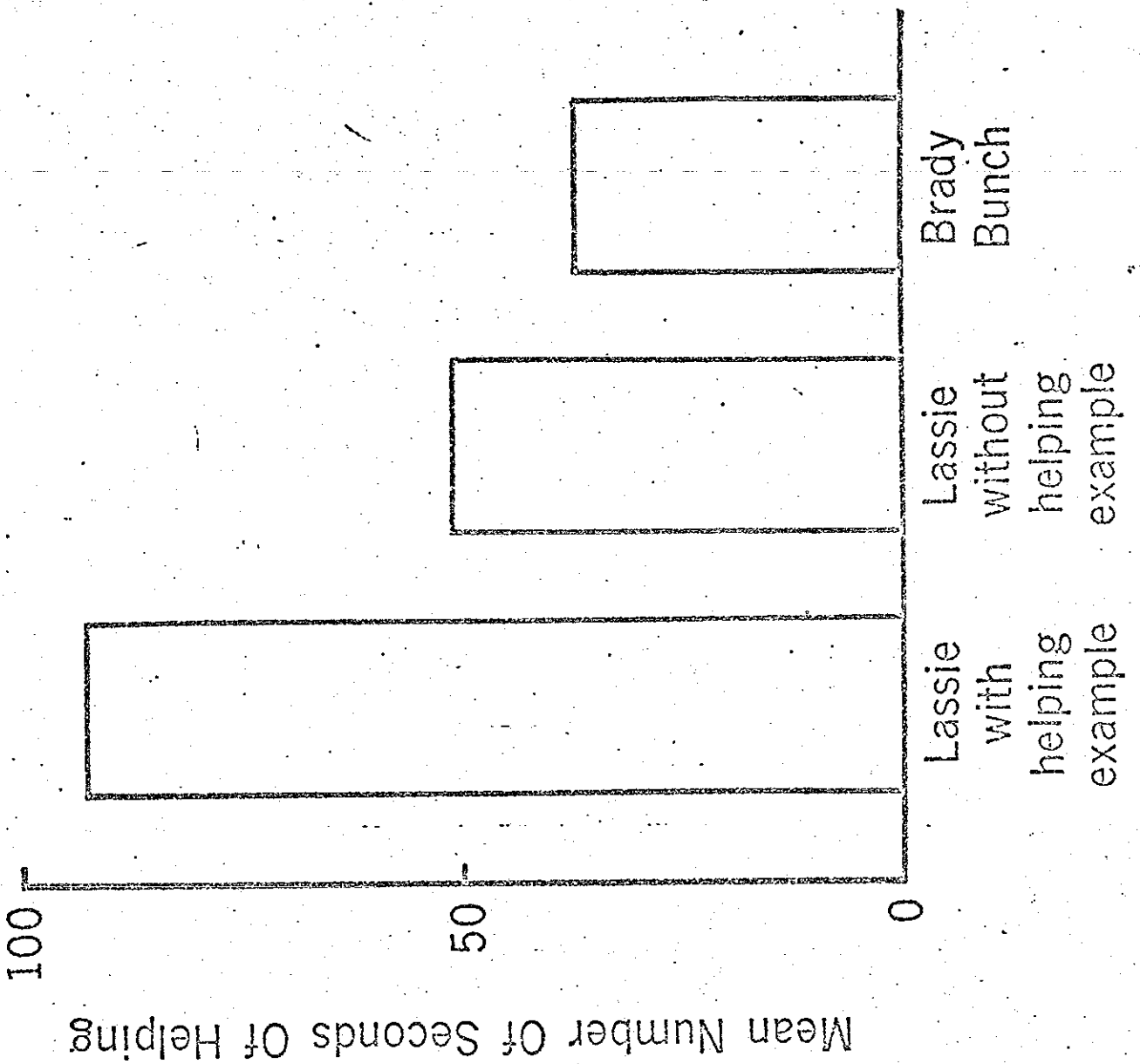

Mean Number Of Seconds Of Helping
100
50
0
Lassie with helping example
Lassie without helping example
Brady Bunch

FIGURE 2

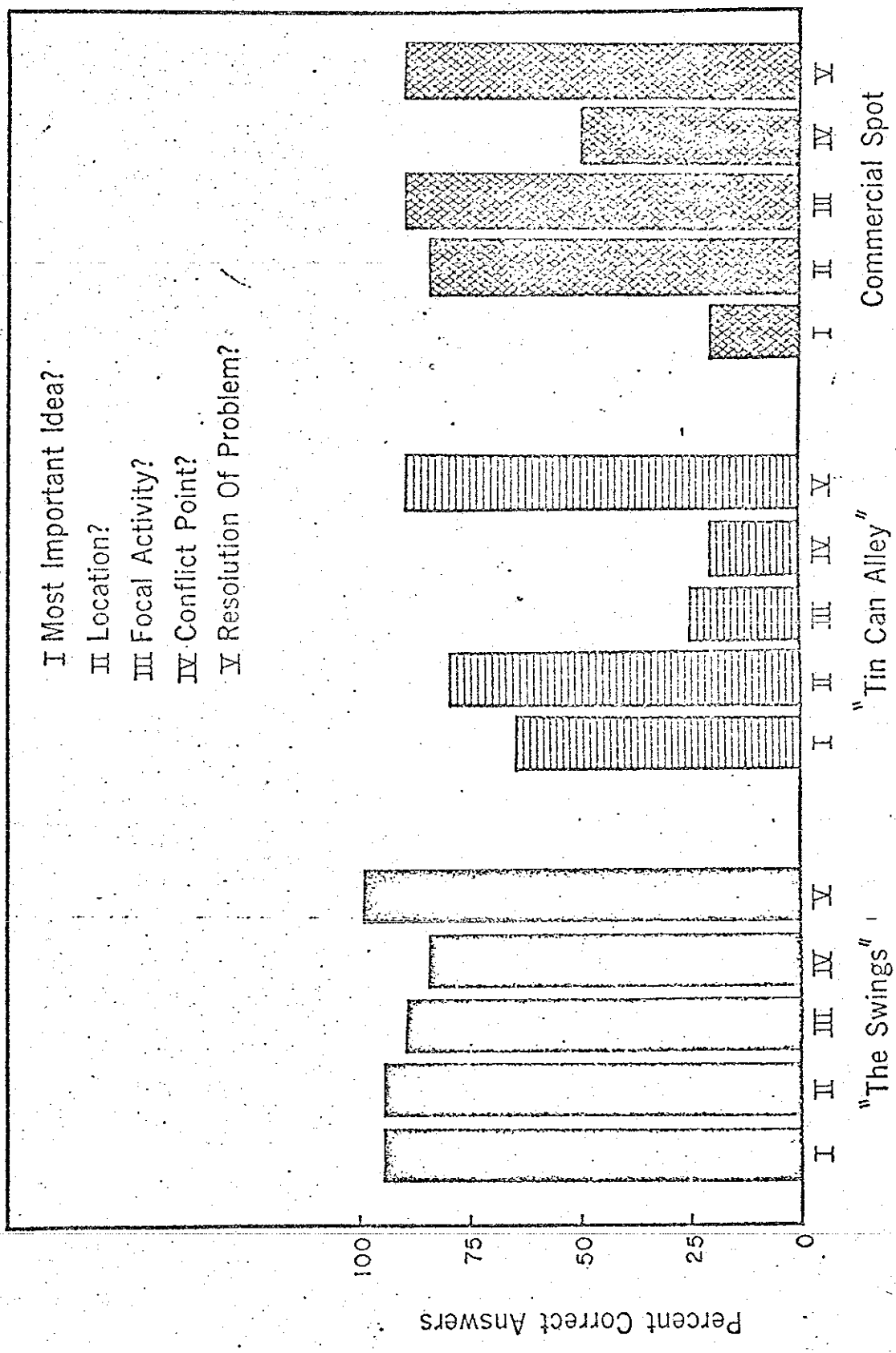

I Most Important Idea?
II Location?
III Focal Activity?
IV Conflict Point?
V Resolution Of Problem?
Percent Correct Answers
0
25
50
75
100
"The Swings"
"Tin Can Alley"
Commercial Spot
I
II
III
IV
V

FIGURE 3

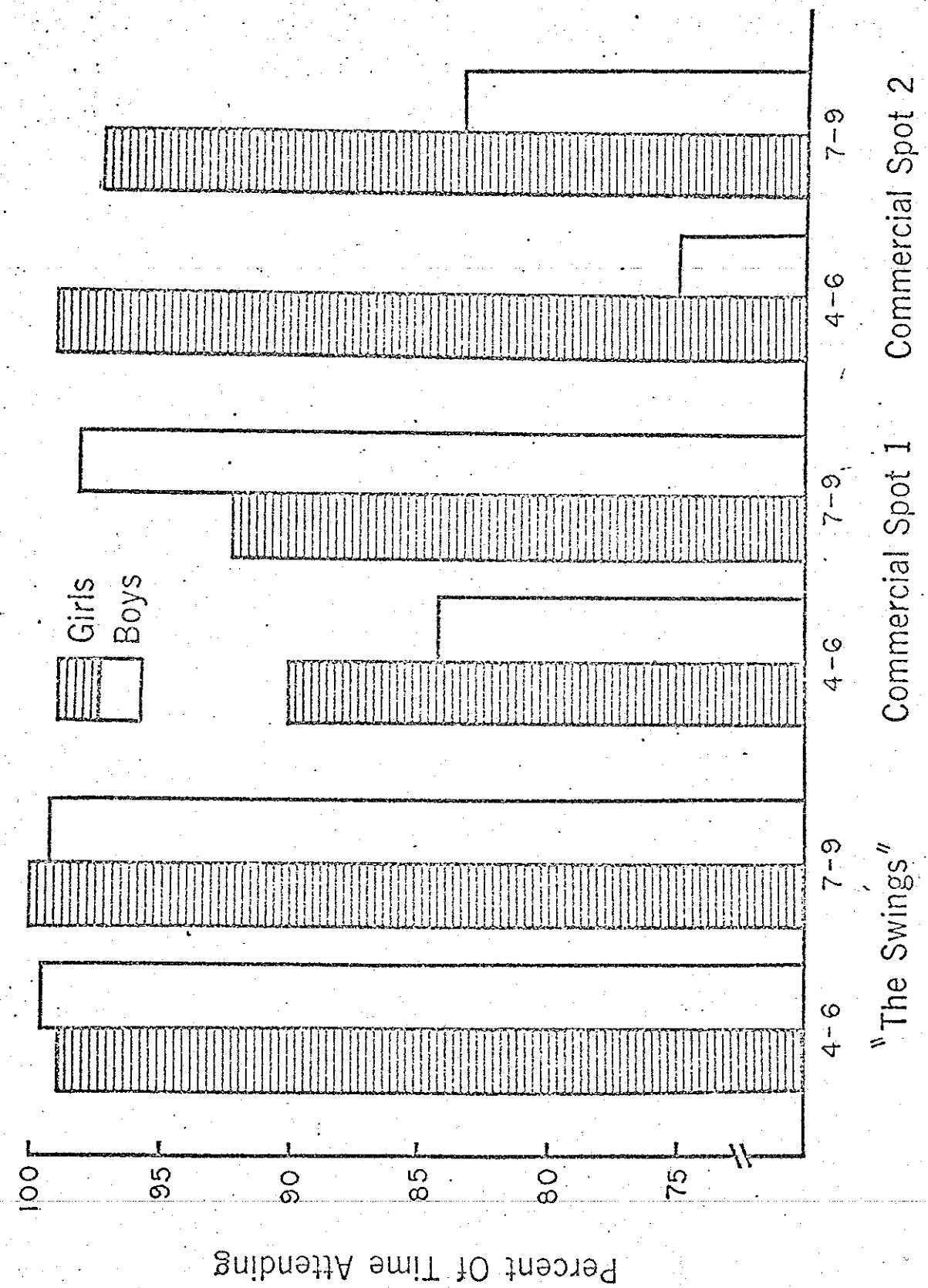
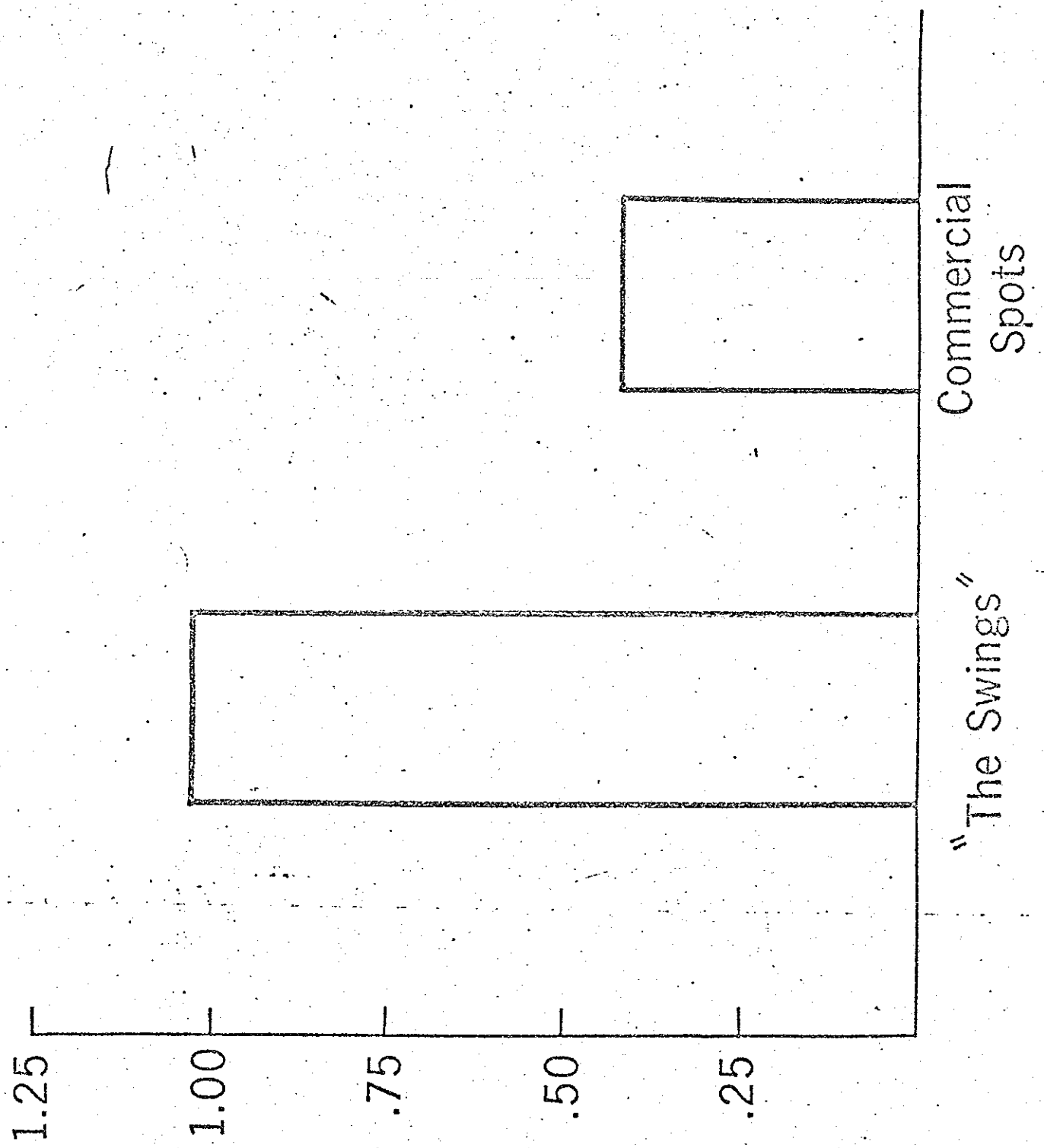

Girls
Boys
7-9
4-6
7-9
4-6
7-9
4-6
"The Swings"
Commercial Spot 1
Commercial Spot 2
100
95
90
85
80
75
Percent Of Time Attending

FIGURE 4


Average Amount Of Successful Interaction
(cooperation/competition ratio in seconds)
1.25
1.00
.75
.50
.25
"The Swings"
Commercial Spots