

## Tots, Television and the World

### **Intro to the literature**

A numerous amount of studies has been done on children on how much television they watch, how much time they spend playing video games or how much of what specific content they watch these days. The studies that will be discussed are closely related but talks about the positive and negative influences of children-oriented television shows that are aimed towards children that are between the ages of three and nine. A couple of popular tv shows are talked about in the articles that will be analyzed. Most of the shows discussed have appeared on television in the United States. In this review the themes that will be talked about are the connection between children and watching violent, negatively influenced television shows, the effects of children watching television shows that contain sexism, stereotyping and racism and how it influences their perspective on reality and how parents need to monitor their children when it comes to watching certain television shows.

### **Literature Review**

An article written by Mary Ni Chang discusses how children need to have discipline when it comes to television due to the negative and violent content that some of these shows contain. This solution may not work for every child but Ni Chang urges parents to attempt to

bestow children the opportunity to have limited say in when, how long and what they are allowed to watch. The way it should be brought up to the child when deciding to use this method is to talk with the child about what shows they have interest in watching. This way if the parents are unaware about some shows that their children may be watching without their knowledge they can be exposed at that moment. The parents would have to decide from their vantage point or not they think the particular shows their children are mentioning are deemed appropriate. After establishing what the child would like to watch, Ni Chang says the next step is for the parents to inform the child that if any violent or inappropriate content comes up while they are watching tv the tv will get turned off. The parents should discuss this with the child beforehand to make sure they have an understanding and agree to the terms (Ni Chang, 2000).

Peter Nikken and Allerd L. Peeters discuss in an article children and their perceptions. Children tend to sometimes believe that the television shows they are watching are real. That the characters are alive somewhere or that the characters that are supposed to be fictional really exist and that they can communicate. An example being that there could be an animal on any given children show that is portrayed to talk. The animal in question may be a real existing animal but is known not to talk. Children see this and they assume that every animal they come across has the ability to have the same skills as what's shown on television. An experimental study was conducted to see what children of various ages know reality from fiction. The study gathered children four to nine years old and they were asked a series of questions based off the

show Sesame Street. The kid's responses were graded upon their answers to each question on a 1-3 scale. If the children responded with a real answer they scored a 3. If the children gave unreal answers they were given a 1 if the kids didn't know the answer they received a 2. After all the assessments were given the results showed that majority of the kids that were closer to age 9 have more of an understanding of reality and fantasy. Kids who were closer to age 4 had less of an understanding of reality versus fantasy (Nikken & Peters, 1988).

Although the perspectives that children have on reality is influenced by the amount of television they watch other factors like stereotypes and gender roles also have an impact on a child's thought process of how society is and how it's supposed to be. An article written by Michelle Ann Abate talks about the famous show, The Muppets and how the show challenges gender roles, stereotypes, race etc. In relation to the above article mentioned by Peter Nikken and Alleerd L. Peters this show, and the children's perception of reality are put into question. The Muppet show addresses the topics like gender identity, stereotyping, race etc. To give children a more realistic version of how society is (Abate, 2009).

Children watch their television shows and what they see is what they think is considered normal but that is not always a good thing what is shown on television can be stereotypical, racist and even sexist. Research discusses the tv show Teletubbies and Barney & friends. The two shows are well known kids shows that contain content that is positive for children to hear and see but also contains some stereotyping and gendering. In Teletubbies the characters are

gendered by their color and by the activities they perform. The boy characters are shown doing things like building, playing sports etc. While the girls are shown doing chores, playing dress up etc. Children watch this and think that is what the norm is. They begin to think that boys work and build and that girls stay home and do chores and clean. In *Barney & Friends* the boys are portrayed as always active and running around while the girls are shown being calm and playing with dolls (Powell and Abels, 2002).

A book written by Dafna Lemish gives an insight on how the things portrayed in television for kids can have the potential of being a positive thing on children. This connects with what Powell and Abels have addressed in their research they talk about how television is a negative thing towards children because of the adult content within it. The content in the book addresses the social constructs displayed in some of the kid's television shows that Powell and Abels refer to and describes a different outlook about it and how if parents were to monitor their children's television habits more closely and put more restrictions on what they watch than watching certain tv doesn't have to be a bad thing (Lemish, 2007).

An article that I found discusses how it can have the potential of being beneficial to the parents and the children if children can help plan a schedule as to when they can have access to certain tv shows and a time limit that is deemed to be appropriate. This technique helps teach children about self-awareness in which they can track their own habits in which this can help them in the future (Ni Chang, 2000). Children can be involved in deciding when and how much

time is appropriate for them to be watching either positive or negative involved shows. I think that it would be a good approach to have children involved in the decision of what, when and where they can watch what they want to a certain extent. This makes the children feel important that they have a say in something. Children that are constantly told “no” tend to be more defiant and makes them want to do the thing they were told they can’t do. When it comes to watching some television shows that kids should not be watching, parents can have their children chose what shows they want to watch and explain to them why they can’t watch certain ones.

Theresa Thompson discusses a study that was conducted involving 89 children between the ages of 4 and 9 to detect how they comprehend the representation of male and female characters in cartoons. Most of the children’s results were that they interpret the male and female characters behavior in stereotypical ways. The results were that majority of the children feel that the male characters are always portrayed as aggressive, violent and active. Whereas the female characters are portrayed to be constantly concerned with their appearances and often are interested in men. Concerns are talked about in the articles about how considering that children start watching television at an early age they are getting a poor representation of reality. Also causing children to mix fantasy with reality (Thompson, 1997). This article ties in with the other studies discussed, the children who were also between the ages of 4 and 9 here they discuss how boys are shown to be violent and aggressive and girls tend to be gentle and calm. This gives children the impression that all boys behave like that and all girls behave like as shown.

Overall the literature discussed presents the idea that children watching certain television shows has a negative effect on them in some areas like their perspective on life, their behavior etc. The research that has been done has presented evidence that more monitoring should be taken place when it comes to children having the freedom to watch television whenever they want. Experiments and studies have been performed to show that there is an effect that certain television shows have that are aimed for children. Although not all the results are determined to be negative there is evidentiary support that the theory that the shows do influence children in some ways is present. For future studies they can do more research on how they can improve and change the content that is shown in children's television shows that has a negative effect on children. Future studies can include ideas as to what more positive content for children can be added to more children's television shows.

### **Adding To The Conversation**

Children pretty much watch what they want these days that it's crazy to think what they understand at a toddler age what's going on most of the time. I am currently a liberal studies major about to earn a bachelor's degree in just a few short weeks. I came to Purchase College originally as a design technology major with a concentration in costume design but realized my sophomore year that it wasn't for me. I decided to switch to a liberal studies major in order for me to still graduate on time. After thinking it over and talking to family and friends I realized that I have a love for children and should consider going into teaching. I am now in route to

becoming a kindergarten teacher in the near future and are interested in learning more about the effects of television shows on children positively and negatively. I'm using this research to benefit me towards my career as it is referring to children and it is an activity that majority of kids do at least once a day. I further investigated my research topic as to how television has an impact on how children, specifically how children under age 10, view the world. This discussion will include, how children's television shows have evolved over the years and their positive and negative effects on children. Other details that will be explored is language, sexuality, stereotypes, and gender use in these television shows aimed towards kids.

This conversation is geared towards parents, educators and caregivers of children. My purpose is to inform these particular groups of people and whoever else who may have interest in the topic, about how television time for children can have its pros and cons and how people who are interested can reduce the cons of this activity. Most people believe now that there is no harm in letting kids watch tv when they want and what they want. My intention is to have more people believe that there should be more monitoring when it comes to children watching television. Also, for people to believe that not every television show is suitable for children even if it's meant to be a kids tv show.

Children had to be occupied in other ways before the television was invented like, playing outside, helping out around the house, chores etc. The first television was invented in the 1920's (Stephens, nd). Times have dramatically changed since then and children had a very different disposition on the world. When people started to have television in their homes, they

would have a very limited number of channels none of which were children's programs. Eventually after the television came out more and more children-oriented shows and programs came out. Shows like *Popeye* came out in the 1930s. *Popeye* is one of the earliest children-oriented television shows that was about a sailor man named Popeye and his girlfriend Olive Oyl. Popeye is a character who has a love for spinach and has big muscles. Along with his arch enemy, Bluto, who also has love for spinach and he frequently fights with Popeye for Olive Oyl's attention. This show has influenced kids to eat more spinach so that they can have big muscles like Popeye and Bluto. Popeye smokes a pipe, has tattoos, and very often talks grammatically incorrect. Popeye's popular phrase that was grammatically incorrect is "I'm Popeye the Sailor Man, I'm strong to the finish, cause I eats me spinach." This was portrayed to be a children's show but has negative tendencies (Milton, 1994). Now this show is geared to kids but due to the fact that Popeye as mentioned before has tattoos, smokes a pipe, fights frequently and talks grammatically incorrect. These kinds of things influence children making them think that its okay to do the same things that Popeye does. Not all children believe that its okay to copy everything that every character does in the shows that they watch but for the younger kids between ages 2 and 6 they tend to believe everything they see and here. Popeye did have some positive contribution as well. Popeye loved spinach which made kids want to eat more spinach.

A television show that introduced positive topics to children is Mister Roger's neighborhood. Mr. Rogers Neighborhood was a popular children's show that came out in 1968. Mr. Roger was an older man who would discuss topics like racism, politics, art and much more in a kid friendly way. These topics were good for children to learn about because depending on the child's age these topics are not discussed often with kids. The show ran for about thirty years



until Mr. Rogers unfortunately passed away due to stomach cancer. Mr. Rogers would have segments on issues that were going on in the world that he would talk to children about along with his puppet friends Milton, 1994). This show is a good example about how a kid-oriented television show can express positive influence for children. Also, what was good about this show and one of the main reasons it was well liked by parents for their children to watch is because Mr. Rogers discussed topics that are sometimes not thoroughly discussed about by parents to their children like Art, Music, race and nationalities. An example on how Mr. Rogers covered these topics is there was an episode where a black actor named Francois Clemmons played a police officer role in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, Mr. Rogers was able to promote tolerance and challenge racial prejudice by showing a scene where Mr. Rogers and Francois Clemmons soaked their feet together and then shared a towel afterwards. This was at a time when black people in the US were banned from swimming in most white-only swimming pools.

In 1969 *Sesame street* made its debut. *Sesame Street* is one of the many children shows that became popular over the years and reruns are still popular today. The show is currently on its forty-ninth season today. *Sesame Street* is mostly viewed by children between the ages of two and four. The show originally was aimed to be viewed by children between the ages of three and five (Thompson, 1994). Over the span of years that the show has been on the air the viewers age has shifted to a younger age. *Sesame Street* is about a group of monsters and puppets that discuss educational topics and sing educational songs. The creator is Joan Ganz Cooney. Joan Ganz Cooney created the show, *Sesame Street* with the intention of teaching children at an early age

about the alphabet, numbers and diversity. The cast of *Sesame Street* is mostly people of color (Thompson, 1994).

Joan Ganz Cooney intentionally designed the cast like this to influence children to learn more about different cultures, ethnic backgrounds etc. (Thompson, 1994). One of the songs that *Sesame Street* sings in one of the episodes is called, The Color Of Me. The Color Of Me is performed by three-character cast members that are of color and one puppet that is also of color. The lyrics that are included in the song send the message to children that they should be happy in their own skin. Not only does Joan Ganz Cooney break cultural barriers but she also breaks gender stereotypes. This I think is a great way to express to children about different cultures and ethnicities. Mainly because if children see the same type of people all the time on the shows that they watch they will start to believe that these are the only type of people that exist in the world. An episode featured gave a great example about how there are existing stereotypes on what careers boys and girls should have, characters, Elmo, Abby Cadabby, and Prairie Dawn. The three friends decide to dress up in what they want to be. In the episode there are signs featured that say Boys and Girls. On the side that is labeled Boys there is a rack with costumes like a fire fighter, a pilot, a police officer and a mail person. On the girl's rack, mostly princess and fairy costumes are shown with pink and purple colors. The characters talk amongst each other and realize that no matter the outfit or what anyone says you are free to dress up as you wish regardless if it's considered masculine or feminine (Choice Reviews Online, 2007). This is an example about how this television show sets a good example for its young viewers. The show teaches children you can be who you want to be. Color has no gender and neither does clothing.

Society forms these into things that represent gender. Television shows for kids should teach them that they can be who they want to be and love themselves the way they are.

*Barney and friends* and *Teletubbies* are two more shows that contain positive and negative messages to children. Barney is a big purple dinosaur amongst his two friends, BJ and Baby Bop who are also dinosaurs. He also has some human friends on the show, some that are children. On *Teletubbies* the four characters are known as tubby creatures, they are Po, Laa Laa, Tinky-Winky and Dipsy (Powell, 2002). Kids are at such a young age that they watch these shows and start to pick up characteristics that are shown on these shows that are stereotypical. The kids don't know that they are stereotypical because most of the time they don't understand what that even means at that age. On *Barney and Friends*, the adult characters in the show had occupations; the men would be mailmen, firefighters, police officers and builders. The women would be teachers or nurses. Having this in the show has children believe that only men can be police officers, builders, firefighters and mailmen and that women can only be nurses and teachers. Children need to be taught that they can be whoever they wish to be in the future. Shows like this make kids believe that occupations and careers are gendered. Some children will even say that don't want to be a particular profession due to the fact that they believe that its only meant for a specific gender. As for *Teletubbies* this character is geared towards younger children and although there are not really any negative influences it does contain some stereotyping. Like *Barney and Friends*, the males and females in the show have occupations that teach kids that men and women have certain careers. Aside from that the show does contain a positive aspect that is good for children to see. The purple Teletubby named Tinky Winky carries around a red purse

throughout the show when Tinky Winky is a male. This I think sets an example for children that not just girls can carry around bags a boy can too.

Overall television shows for children all have positive and negative effects on children it just depends on how you look at it. Older children usually understand the difference between fantasy and reality it's the younger ones that have to be more monitored when it comes to having free range of the television. The audience that this informative and argumentative paper is helpful for is parents, educators and caregivers that tend to children. This may help that audience in terms of knowing what to expect from children on how they think and to answer some questions as to why some children believe what they believe and why they may act a certain way. Some of the issues mentioned like girls believing that only boys can wear certain things and do certain things and boys believing that only girls can do and wear certain things, this problem can be mended to by showing boys and girls television shows that break stereotype barriers including racism and sexism.

## Bibliography

Thompson, Teresa L., and Eugenia Zerbinos. "Television Cartoons: Do Children Notice It's a Boy's World?" *Sex Roles*, vol. 37, Sept. 1997, pp. 415–432. EBSCOhost, ezproxy.purchase.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=507585699&site=eds-live.

Powell, Kimberly A., and Lori Abeles. "Sex-Role Stereotypes in TV Programs Aimed at the Preschool Audience: An Analysis of Teletubbies and Barney & Friends." *Women & Language*, vol. 25, no. 2, Fall 2002, p. 14. EBSCOhost, ezproxy.purchase.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hus&AN=6865090&site=eds-live.

Nikken, Peter, and Allerd L. Peeters. "Children's Perceptions of Television Reality." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 32, no. 4, Fall 1988, pp. 441–452. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/08838158809386715.

Ni Chang, Mary. "Reasoning with Children About Violent Television Shows and Related Toys." *Early Childhood Education Journal*, vol. 28, no. 2, Winter 2000, pp. 85–89. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1023/A:1009595219927.

"Children and Television: A Global Perspective." *Choice Reviews Online* 44.10 (2007): n. pag. Print.

Abate, Michele Ann. "Taking Silliness Seriously: Jim Henson's The Muppet Show, the Anglo-American Tradition of Nonsense, and Cultural Critique." *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 42, no. 4, Aug. 2009, pp. 589–613. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1111/j.1540-5931.2009.00698.x

Mares, Marie-Louise, and Emory Woodard. "Positive Effects of Television on Children's Social Interactions: A Meta-Analysis." *Media Psychology*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2005, pp. 301–322., doi:10.1207/s1532785xmep0703\_4. Chen, Milton. *Smart Parent's Guide to Kids' Tv*. San Francisco, CA: KQED., 1994. Print

Chen, Milton. *Smart Parent's Guide to Kids' Tv*. San Francisco, CA: KQED., 1994. Print

Jacobs, Jason. "RAISING GAYS: On Glee, Queer Kids, and the Limits of the Family." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, July 2014, pp. 319–352. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1215/10642684-2422692.

Jordan, Amy B. "The Three-Hour Rule and Educational Television for Children." *Popular Communication*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2004, pp. 103–118., doi:10.1207/s15405710pc0202\_3.

