

## **A Child's Right to be Entertained**

**Mary Beth Leidman, Ed.D.  
Department of Communications Media  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania**

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**This discussion explores the controversy surrounding whether or not preschool aged children three to six have the right to be entertained by electronic media, specifically television, without regard to if there is serious or any measurable educational content in the experience. Or must every experience, especially in regards to children's television be treated as a teaching moment or opportunity. At the outset, it should be stated that there is, of course, no clear answer, but the question is valid and deserves respectful attention. It is also understood at the outset that the content of any such entertainment vehicles will not serve to harm or cause distress to children. Common sense serves to draw these boundaries.**

**There is also room in this discussion to wonder, both publically and privately if there is ever any time when children do not learn something from the media to which they are exposed on a regular basis. Yes, for better or worse, there are media experiences which are not designed to educate. This writer defines that such media experiences as Mickey Mouse and Yogi Bear, for instance are not cognitively or affectively educational. Nor should they be. They are entertaining.**

**For the purposes of this discussion "entertainment" is being defined as those experiences which capture attention and produce enjoyment, preferably increasing a sense of well being and glee. The concept of "rights" is harder to define. However, the idea of a "right" might be viewed as the freedom to make elementary choices. Children's media in general and children's television programming specifically feature a picture of disagreement among the many communities who**

**proactively weigh in on activities of children. Parents, grandparents, teachers, clergy, the government, media producers, toy manufacturers, and marketers are all players. There are more; the list is endless. The only group missing is the children.**

**Children remain the most vulnerable group to information gained through exposure to media. One can argue that all experiences for the pre-schooler are both affective and cognitive. But the overall idea that every waking moment must be educational brings with it the danger of raising children's stress levels. Research has shown s that stress disorder is seen in preschoolers under pressure to perform academically which results in lack of social competence, anger aggression, and anxiety withdrawal (Masataka, 2002). There is a need to help children relax, regardless of age.**

**Television and other forms of electronic media are often viewed as evil incarnate, the bane of society's ills. This is the scapegoat approach and simply untrue. Here the readers are asked to pause and broaden their perspectives consciously admitting that technology and the access to technology has forever changed the relationship between children and media down to the very earliest ages. Supporting this logic is the sanctioned policy of the American Academy of Pediatrics that children 2 years and younger watch no television and that children over 2 years limit viewing to less than two hours of television per day (Certain & Kahn, 2002). This logic is irrefutable. Yet it does not address the idea of children relaxing in front of the television for part of the allotted time. The driving questions remain: Are there two sides to the question? Is there room for moderation?**

**Yet even as educators are criticizing television there is also the admission that television watching by young children can have positive impact. For instance,**

undeniably, reading readiness can be increased by exposure to television (Desmond, 2001). Shows such as “Sesame Street” and “Gina D’s Kids Club” are clear examples of educational shows. Indeed, many shows are embedded with cognitive information by design (Levin, 1998). Still, educators on all levels are simply not comfortable, not sure what to do with children’s television nor how to judge its quality or impact on children except in most cases to be intensely and sometimes irrationally critical. (Certain & Kahn, 2002) Interestingly enough much of the same puzzlement can be found on the creators’ side as well (CBS, 1988). There is passion on both sides of the debate which often ignores the existence of a middle ground which respects children, their needs and their rights.

There are certain givens which establish the rules surround the children’s media debate. Some have already been discussed previously herein. However, in the interest of clarifying the issues, conventional wisdom supports that there are certain basic values regarding children, television and the adults who are connected to the creation or policing of children’s television programming.

These include the following ideas

1. Children like to be entertained
2. Most children like to watch television.
3. All of those reading this discussion (adults) were once children
4. The vast majority of adults (99.9%) want what is “best” for children. No caring adult wants to harm children
5. All adults representing many constituencies dogmatically defend the stance that they KNOW what is best for children

All one needs to do is walk through a Toys R Us, or Google “Children’s Games,” or glance at any TV Guide to see how much electronic media and programming is geared to young children. It is an irrefutable fact that children’s media represents a billion dollar industry. Specifically it is in the tens of billions annually (Fonda & Roston, 2004). And remember: it is not the children who are making the purchases. They might be acting as the “advisors” but they are not doing the actual purchasing. Thus is the case with the creation and perpetuation of children’s television programming and electronic media. The children are not initially making the decision to which television program they are being exposed. They usually develop loyalties based on repetition but the initial choices are not theirs.

Creating captivating and imaginative programming for children is extremely easy. Almost too easy. Indeed, all of the rules for creating children’s programming can be found within the pages of Jean Piaget’s writings. Centration, the idea that young children will automatically pay attention to the single most powerful stimuli at any one moment, is wholly transferable to electronic media. Bright colors, simple tunes, animated characters all join forces together to make media the perfect vehicle for delivering of ideas, products, and information to our youngest media consumers. (Piaget, 1984). Simply analyze a captivating toy commercial or an educational program; they both utilize the same easy-to-duplicate methodology. Piaget’s ideas are the how-to of children’s media. Analyze the successful programs, create something a bit different and show to children over and over again. It is a recipe for capturing younger audiences which rarely misses. The unsuspecting children of today live in a tough world filled with knowledgeable groups all competing for their fleeting attention. States media game writer and

creator, Dr. Allen Partridge “Television and electronic games for children are always easier to develop and replicate given the predictability of children’s entertainment and educational.” (Interview, 2007)

It is a highly unpopular and rarely voiced stance for anyone, especially an educator to defend the right of children to occasionally just sit and be couch potatoes. It is much easier to defend the conventional high ground. No one is suggesting that children should be able to sit and watch electronic media 24/7. No one is even suggesting that infants should watch electronic media. But at the same time, Fred Roger’s philosophy that the best children’s television programming is that which motivates children to leave the television and begin a non-passive activity (Family Communications, Inc., 2007) is denying the idea that children can and will benefit from laughing just for the sake of laughing or sitting and watching a program without express educational objectives. The question is, “Is there worth in just relaxing and doing nothing?” Balancing the picture would appear to offer some basic insights and rationale to answer this. The answer should be a resounding, “Yes.” Educational psychologist Dr. Roger Briscoe has reflected, “At times there are too many expectations on young children to learn and regurgitate. It often creates a pressure cooker mentality which works against life long learning habits. Down time is not only acceptable for young children it should be encouraged. Even watching television which is purely for entertainment value (Interview, 2006).

Although children are adults in the making, the adult world often acts afraid that children who are not actively involved in measurable cognitive or affective experiences are somehow wasting their time. This writer does not pretend to be an educational psychologist but logic would dictate that many of the same experiences which allow adults relaxation and down time are also applicable to the world of

children. Interestingly enough, in many cases adults and children find humor in the same media material (Tripp et al, 2004). Children learn how to laugh and develop senses of humor from entertainments. Briscoe reported that children benefit greatly from relaxed unstructured time, even watching some age appropriate primarily entertainment based television (Interview, 2006).

It remains easy to damn the media. This debate is old. In the late 1980s CBS created an informational program entitled, “Adults Only – Children Present.” In this presentation, the children’s programming department explained and illustrated the line which it was trying to walk between entertainment and education, as well as marketing. Of course this stance supported their inherent goals for audience development but the motivation and overall logic of their presentation offered a powerful and thoughtful argument about the world of children’s media and the adults who are creating the world for children. This supported the supposition that children have very little input in to the media which is available for them.

Much of the controversy surrounding children’s television and media stems from the nature of the audience involved and its relationship with the technologically driven delivery system as well as the content. In reality, in regards to children’s media, a group of adults are totally in control of an unsuspecting group of consumers, namely children. This is a unique situation. The decision making model is unbalanced, and some would say unfair. Young children remain the only constituency of media consumers who have no voice in the quality or content of their product, and to what entertains them.

For the past five years this writer has acted as one of two educational consultants for a nationally distributed children's television show entitled, "Gina D's Kid Club." The process of developing a show of this type is daunting from both the creative and financial vantage points. There are thousands of person hours involved in the show as well as millions of dollars. Each episode carries with it a topic based group of educational goals and objectives supporting age-appropriate subjects such as numbers, colors, parts of the day, and even a visit to the doctor. The shows are designed to address educational concerns for pre-schoolers thus offering educational rationale for the parents and teachers who might guide a child to watch it. But in reality, the children watching the show do not really care about the education to which they are being exposed. They watch the show because they like to be entertained. They like the images, music, puppets, and characters. "Gina D" creates a tune filled, charming comfortable environment for children to enjoy. Adults must always keep at the forefront of their minds the idea that for young children, education can be an unintended by-product of a media experience. Having observed children gaze at television and many other electronic screen-based media, it becomes evident all children want in reality is to sometimes simply be engaged and entertained. Just like adults. Enjoyment has value in itself. Playing on the computer, singing-a-long and splashing in the water all have entertainment value not for countless hours at any one time, but for some time. And lest adults forget this, remember the many times in your lives when you have been "forcibly encouraged" to continue in activities with no end. This situation is no different for children. Some shows such as "Gina D" are educational by design but it is the entertainment value of the show which allows it to gain an audience and attain effectiveness.

**There is a very strong argument to be made for the idea that children really do need to be children. This means allowing them the freedom to be silly and laugh as well as to be sad and to cry a bit. It means allowing them to just be unfocused and yes, even lazy on occasion. This is a reality which is very hard for teachers and other interested adults to accept since the equation of learning most often includes the idea of doing. But as adults need and enjoy real down time to just sit and be, there has to be the [not easily] articulated need and desire for similar times among children as well. Thus there is real affective value to be found in the world of children's television programming and other media for sheer entertainment's sake. Learning to laugh, be happy or simply smile quietly might just be the by-product of children sometimes just sitting and watching a television program or two. It is not meant to supersede time with parents or playing with siblings, this discussion simply presents the idea that children's media is one legitimate form of entertainment to which all children should have the opportunity to indulge in guilt-free.**

**Author Information: Dr. Mary Beth Leidman is a professor of Communications Media at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She has produced award winning radio and television programming and teaches courses in media criticism as well as children's television and media.**

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