Why TV Is Good For Kids

By Daniel McGinn

No, It's Not

By Karen Springen

The stars of 'Rockie Pokie Ole,' 'Blue's Clues,' 'Arthur,' and 'Dora the Explorer'
E IS FOR ELMO: The man behind the Muppet, Kevin Clash, at work last week on the 'Sesame Street' set. The show, filmed in Queens, N.Y., is now in its 34th season.
Guilt Free TV

In the beginning, there was Big Bird. Now, thanks to intense competition from Disney and Nick, there are more quality shows for preschoolers than ever.

WHEN ALICIA LARGE WAS growing up, her parents rarely let her watch television. Even the Muppets were off-limits, she says, because her parents disliked the sexual tension between Kermit and Miss Piggy. Now 31 and raising her own sons—ages 2 and 3—Large views TV more benevolently. Her boys love "Dora the
Puppets to Muppets: A Hit Parade

Children’s television has been evolving for more than half a century. A time line of highs and lows.

1947 Howdy Doody and pal Buffalo Bob were the first superstars of kids’ TV. Puppet power!

1949 The first TV animated show was Crusader Rabbit, created by Jay Ward, who later gave us “Rocky and His Friends.”

1949 Bozo the Clown debuts. The red-haired funny man also made hit records and generated millions in merchandise sales.

1953 The first interactive kids’ show was Winky Dink and You.

Explorer,” so when she takes them on errands, she draws a map—the bank, the grocery store—so they can track their progress as Dora does. Among Large’s friends, kids’ TV—what and how much are you watching—is a constant conversation. Yes, many parents still use TV as a babysitter. But increasingly, she says, parents are looking to TV to help them do a better job of raising kids. “Our generation is using it completely differently,” she says.

Parents have felt conflicted about television since its earliest days. Even Philo T. Farnsworth, TV’s inventor, fretted over letting his son watch cowboy shows, according to biographer Evan I. Schwartz.

That anxiety continues. In a survey released last week by Public Agenda, 22 percent of parents said they’d “seriously considered getting rid of [their TV] altogether” because it airs too much sex and bad language. But at the same time, for parents of the youngest viewers—ages 0 to 5—there are new reasons for optimism. Now that PBS, which invented the good-for-kids genre, has new competition from Nickelodeon and Disney, there are more quality choices for preschoolers than ever.

Inside those networks, a growing number of Ph.D.s are injecting the latest in child-development theory into new programs. In Disney’s “Stanley,” meet a freckle-faced kid who’s fascinated with animals; in one episode, he and his pals explore the life and habitat of a platypus. Nickelodeon now airs 4.5 hours of quality preschool shows daily (in addition to learning-free fare like “SpongeBob” for older kids). Shows like “Dora” and “Blue’s Clues” good kids into interacting with the television set; studies show this improves problem-solving skills. Even the granddaddy of this genre, “Sesame Street,” has undergone a makeover to better serve today’s precocious viewers. The newcomers provide stiff competition to Mister Rogers, whose show stopped production in 2000 (it still airs on PBS). But he welcomes his new TV neighbors. “I’m just glad that more producers...”
Users' Guide

Doctors advocate "media literacy," which includes making wise TV choices. Some tips:

Set limits. Pediatricians discourage TV for kids under 2, ration older kids to two hours of daily "screen time" (TV, computer and videogames).

Pull up a chair. When parents co-view with kids, they watch for bad shows; encourage interaction with good ones and talk together after turning off the tube.

No TV in bedrooms. More than half of kids have one, but it leads to unsupervised viewing and a potential for overdose. Make TV a family-room activity.

Use TV-book synergy. Kids' programming, from "Arthur" to "The Book of Pooh," often comes from books. After watching, children are frequently wild about reading. To exploit this, try hitting the library after a favorite show.

FOCUS, FOCUS, FOCUS: Anderson, a psychologist, observes children's behavior while they watch TV. Their recall is amazing.

and purveyors of television have signed the pledge to protect childhood," says Fred Rogers, who now writes parenting books.

That's the good news. The bad news is that working these shows into kids' lives in a healthy way remains a challenge. Much of what kids watch remains banal or harmful. Many kids watch too much. There are also troubling socioeconomic factors at work. In lower-income homes, for instance, kids watch more and are more likely to have TV in their bedrooms, a practice pediatricians discourage. But even as some families choose to go TV-free (sidebar, page 60), more parents are recognizing that television can be beneficial. In the Public Agenda survey, 93 percent of parents agree that "TV is fine for kids as long as he or she is watching the right shows and watching in moderation."

When it comes to the right shows, "Sesame Street" remains the gold standard. Last week, as the crew taped an episode for its 34th season, the set looked comfortably familiar: while Telly and Baby Bear worked on a skit near Hooper's Store, Snuffleupagus hung from the rafters, sleeping under a sheet. The show's longevity is a testament to the research-driven process founder Joan Ganz Cooney invented in the late 1960s. Then, as now, each season begins with Ph.D.s working alongside writers to set goals and review scripts. Any time there's a question—will kids understand Slimey the Worm's mission to the moon?—they head to day-care centers to test the material.

When "Sesame" began reinventing kids' TV in the early '70s, Daniel Anderson was a newly minted professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Like most child-development pros at that time, he assumed TV was bad for kids. Then one day Anderson taught his class that young children have very short attention spans. One student challenged him: "So why do kids sit still for an hour to watch 'Sesame Street'?" "I genuinely didn't know..."
the answer," Anderson recalls. So he went to a lab and placed kids in front of TVs to find it.

What he found surprised him. Like most researchers, he assumed that fast-moving images and sounds mesmerized young viewers. But videotapes of kids' viewing showed that their attention wandered most during transitions between segments and when dialogue or plotlines became too complex. He hypothesized that even young children watch TV for the same reason adults do: to enjoy good stories. To test that theory, he sliced up "Sesame Street" skits so the plot no longer made sense. Even 2-year-olds quickly realized the story was amiss and stopped watching. Some knocked on the TV screen. Others called out: "Mommy, can you fix this?"

Over years of research, Anderson reached a startling conclusion: "Television viewing is a much more intellectual activity for kids than anybody had previously supposed."

This research might have stayed hidden in psych journals if it hadn't been for the work of two equally powerful forces: the U.S. Congress and a purple dinosaur named Barney. In 1990 Congress passed the Children's Television Act, increasing demand for quality kids' shows. Then "Barney & Friends" was launched as a PBS series in 1992. Kids went wild, and merchandise flew off shelves. Until then, Nickelodeon and Disney had been content to leave preschool shows to the do-gooders at PBS. Now they saw gold. "The success of 'Barney' just changed everybody's feeling—it became 'OK, we should be able to do that, too,'" says Marjorie Kalins, a former "Sesame" executive.

It was a profitable move. By 2001 Nick and Disney's TV businesses had generated a combined $1.68 billion in revenue, according to Paul Kagan Associates. Everyone admits that licensing money influences programming decisions. (Ironically, merchandisers at Nickelodeon lobbied against "Dora" because they believed that another show would generate more sales.) Ads and toys can detract from many parents' enthusiasm for the shows; no matter how much your kid may learn from "Sagwa" or "Rolie Polie Olie," the characters are hard to love when you can't get through Wal-Mart without a giant case of "I-WANT-itis."

Until there's a way to make shows free, that overcommercialization will continue. But for parents, there's some comfort from knowing that more TV producers are applying the latest research to make their shows better. This happened partly because researchers of Anderson's generation helped grow a new crop of Ph.D.s, who began graduating into jobs at "Sesame" and Nickelodeon. And like seeds from a dandelion blown at a child, folks who'd trained at "Sesame"...
Playhouse Disney. Today it uses a 28-page "Whole Child Curriculum" detailing what shows should teach.

To see how research can drive these new-generation shows, come along, neighbor, as we visit a day-care center on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Dr. Christine Ricci sits in a child-size chair, holding a script and tapping a red pen against her lip. Ricci, who holds a psychology Ph.D. from UMass, is research director for "Dora the Explorer," which airs on Nick Jr., Nickelodeon's preschool block. In each episode Dora, an animated Latina girl, goes on a journey with a monkey named Boots. Using a map to guide them (which helps kids' spatial skills), they visit three locations ("Waterfall, mountain, forest") kids yell) and solve problems. As in "Blue's Clues,"

GOT BLUE?
Actor Donovan Patton stars as Joe on Nick Jr.'s "Blue's Clues," named after this lovable cartoon puppy.

began taking root inside other networks. Anne Sweeney, who'd studied at Harvard with "Sesame" co-founder Gerald Lesser, interned with television activist Peggy Charren and spent 12 years at Nickelodeon, took over the Disney Channel in 1996. She hired a team (led by ex-Nick programmer Rich Ross) to design preschool shows. By 1999 Disney had a full block of little-kid programming it branded Nick Jr.'s groundbreaking hit in which a dog named Blue and the host Joe help kids solve puzzles, "Dora" encourages kids to yell back at the screen (often in Spanish) or do physical movements (like rowing a boat).

Today Ricci shows 4-year-olds a crudely animated "Dora" episode slated for next season. As they watch, Ricci's

...
her daughter can count to 25. Thanks to “Dora,” her 18-month-old says “Hola.”

As kids that young start tuning in, even “Sesame” is rethinking its approach. The show was originally designed for kids 3 to 5, but by the mid-1990s, many viewers were 2 or younger. The tykes seemed to tire of 60 minutes of fast-paced Muppet skits (the pacing was originally modeled after “Laugh-In” and TV commercials). So in 1999 “Sesame” introduced “Elmo’s World,” a 15-minute segment that ended every show. Even after that change, “Sesame” VP Lewis Bernstein noticed how today’s little kids would sit still to watch 90-minute videotaped movies. So last February “Sesame” unveiled more longer segments. In “Journey to Ernie,” Big Bird and Ernie play hide-and-seek against an animated background. Today ratings are up. The cast likes the new format, too. Before, stories were constantly cut short. “It was a little discombobulating,” says Kevin Clash, the muscular, deep-voiced Muppet captan who brings Elmo to life. Now Elmo I-o-o-o-ves the longer stories.

So just how much good do these shows do? On a recent afternoon five undergrads sit around a table in the Yale University psychology department, playing a bizarre variation of bingo to try to find out. Together they watch three episodes of “Barney & Friends,” each filling in hash marks on six sheets of paper. After each screening, they tally how many “teaching elements” they’ve counted. “I’ve got 9 vocabulary, 6 numbers ... 11 sharing,” says one student. Afterward Yale researcher Dorothy Singer will crunch the data and compare them with past seasons. Her work has shown that the higher an episode’s score, the more accurately children will be able to recount the plot and use the vocabulary words.

PBS does more of this postproduction “summative” research than other networks. Study after study shows “Sesame” viewers are better prepared for school. “Dragons Tale,” a “Sesame”-produced animated show, helps kids become more goal-orientated, and “Between the Lions,” a puppet show produced by Boston’s WGBH, helps kids’ reading. Nick research offers proof of the effectiveness of “Dora” and “Blue’s Clues.” Disney doesn’t do summative research; Disney execs say for now they’d rather devote resources to creating more shows for new viewers. Competitors suggest another reason: Disney’s shows may not measure up. “It’s scary to test,” says “Sesame” research chief Rosemarie Truglio. “Maybe that’s a piece of it—they’re afraid.”

Network-funded research won’t change the minds of folks who say kids are better off with no television at all. That view gained strength in 1999, when the American Academy of Pediatrics began discouraging any television for kids under 2. But when you parse the pro- and anti-TV rhetoric, the two sides don’t sound so far apart as you’d suspect. The pro-TV crowd, for instance, quickly concedes that violent TV is damaging to kids, and that too many kids watch too many lousy shows. The anti-TV crowd objects mostly to TV’s widespread overuse. Like Haggen-Dazs, TV seems to defy attempts at moderation,
What's Right for My Kid?

We asked a panel of experts what kinds of shows are good for kids of various ages. In general, they said, trust your gut, avoid violent programs and stay tuned in to what they're watching.

**Ages 2-5**

The best shows for this age group—like *Dora the Explorer* (right) and *Clifford the Big Red Dog*—are slow-moving and repetitive.

**Ages 5-8**

Kids begin to understand the vocabulary of TV; good and bad guys, for example. Try *Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat*, based on a book by novelist Amy Tan.

**Ages 9-11**

At this age, kids, like adults, want TV that entertains. Shows like *Doug* (left), *Lizzie McGuire* and *The Wild Thornberrys* are appropriate. Characters have inner lives and complex motives.

**Adolescents**

Each family—and teenager—is different; TV-watching guidelines vary. Experts recommend *Gilmore Girls* and *Nick News* (left) for tweens and younger teens. It's difficult to monitor older teens.

...they suggest, so it's safer to abstain entirely. They believe overviewsing especially affects children because of what Marie Winn, author of "The Plug-In Drug," calls the "displacement factor." That's when kids watch so much TV that they don't engage in enough brain-enhancing free play as toddlers or read enough during elementary school. Although pro-TV researchers say there are no data to support those fears, they agree it could be true. In fact, Anderson is currently conducting an experiment to measure whether having adult shows (like "Jeopardy!"), playing in the background interferes with children's play. Bad news, soap-opera fans: the early data suggest it might.

Even shows the academics applaud could be better. In his UMass office, Anderson pops in a videotape of "Dora." It's one of the handful of shows that he advised during their conception. In this episode, Dora and Boots paddle a canoe down a river, around some rocks, toward a waterfall. "No, a waterfall!" If I'd read this script, I'd have completely blocked this," he says, because it models unsafe behavior. Anderson has his arms crossed, his eyebrows scrunch; occasionally he talks to the screen, like an NFL fan disputing a bad call. "Oh, God, another dangerous thing," he says as Dora and Boots canoe under a tunnel with no helmet. He still likes "Dora," but not this episode. "The education is a little thinner than I would wish, and it's a little dubious sending them on such a dumb journey." Then he watches "Bear" and "Blue's Clues," still nitpicking but happier.

**EVEN AS THE KIDS' TV ENVIRONMENT IMPROVES, SHORTCOMINGS REMAIN.** Only PBS airs educational shows for older elementary kids (examples: "Zoom" and "Cyberchase"). In focus groups, says Nickelodeon president Herb Scannell, older kids say they get enough learning in school; what commercial broadcaster is going to argue with the audience? Producers have other worries. Mitchell Kriegman, creator of "Bear in the Big Blue House," says parents could grow too enamored of obviously educational, A-B-C 1-2-3-type shows. One of the most successful episodes of "Bear" involves potty training. "The network's reaction was 'Oh, my God, you can't say poop and pee on TV,'" Kriegman says. "Bear" did, and families loved it. Tighter curricula could dampen that creativity.

But those worries are for the future. For now, it's worth celebrating the improvements—however incremental—in shows for TV's youngest audience. Not everyone will want to raise a glass; like alcohol or guns, TV will be used sensibly in some homes and wreak havoc in others. Debating its net societal value will remain a never-ending pursuit. In the meantime parents live through these trade-offs daily. A recent issue of Parenting magazine offered the following question to help assess parenting skills: "If my child watched TV only when ... A) There's an educational show on public television, B) I have time to narrate the action for him ... or C) I want to take a shower." The scoring code rates the answers: A) Liar, B) Big fat liar, and C) You may not be perfect, but at least you're honest." As kids' TV raises the bar, parents who choose a different answer—D) All of the above—have a little less reason to feel guilty.
Why We Tuned Out

When Jazzy was 1 year old, her babysitter asked if TV was OK. We thought about it, and we said, ‘No.’

BY KAREN SPRINGEN

WHAT’S YOUR FAVORITE TV show? our girls’ beloved ballet instructor asked each pint-size dancer in her class. Our oldest daughter, Jazzy, didn’t know how to answer. She shrugged. Her moment of awkwardness results from a decision my husband, Mark, and I made five years ago. We don’t allow our kids to watch TV. Period. Not at home, not at friends’ houses; and they don’t watch videos or movies, either. We want our daughters, Jazzy, now nearly 6, and Gigi, 3, to be as active as possible, physically and mentally. So when a babysitter asked whether Jazzy, then 1 year old, could watch, we thought about it—and said no.

When we look at our inquisitive, energetic daughters, we have no regrets. And our reading of the research makes us feel even better. Nielsen Media Research reports that American children 2 through 11 watch three hours and 16 minutes of television every day. Kids who watch more than 10 hours of TV each week are more likely to be overweight, aggressive and slow to learn in school, according to the American Medical Association. For these reasons, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no TV for children younger than 2 and a maximum of two hours a day of “screen time” (TV, computers or videogames) for older kids. We are convinced that without TV, our daughters spend more time than other kids doing cartwheels, listening to stories and asking such interesting questions as “How old is God?” and “What makes my rubber ducks float?” They also aren’t hamstrung by TV images of September 11—because they never saw them.

Going without TV in America has its difficult moments. When I called my sister, Lucy, to make arrangements for Thanksgiving, she warned that her husband was planning to spend the day watching football. We’re going anyway. We’ll just steer the girls toward the playroom. And some well-meaning friends tell us our girls may be missing out on good educational programming. Maybe. But that’s not what most kids are watching. Nielsen Media Research reports that among children 2 through 11, the top-five TV shows in the new creative, independent learners and calls our decision “awesome.” And Mayo Clinic pediatrician Daniel Broughton, another group member, says that “there’s no valid reason” the girls need to view television.

As the girls grow older, we can’t completely shield them from TV anyway. We’ll probably watch Olympic rhythmic gymnastics; the girls love it. And if Jazzy’s favorite baseball team, the Cubs, ever make the World Series, we’ll tune in. Last Monday Jazzy’s music teacher showed “The Magic School Bus: Inside the Haunted House.” Though “Magic School Bus” is a well-regarded Scholastic product, I still cringed, wondering why the kids weren’t learning about vibrations and sounds by singing and banging on drums. But I kept silent. I’d never require my kids to abstain in school. Like Jean Lotus, the Oak Park, Ill., mom who founded the anti-TV group the White Dot and who also reluctantly allows her kids to view TV in school, I’m wary of being seen “as the crusading weirdo.” But some public ridicule will be worth it if I help get even a few people to think twice before automatically turning on the tube. Now it’s time for me to curl up with the girls and a well-worn copy of “Curious George.”