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# 'There It Was— The Electronic Pied Piper Again'

A Father's Quest to Learn  
The Impact That TV  
Has on Today's Youth

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"Daggone Redskin in mah store," grumbled the bearded owner of a general store in a *Tales of Wells Fargo* episode on television. "Bad for mah business."

Dr. Lester Beck, an experimental psychologist and a professional student of television, chuckled in his chair. "Terrible," he said wryly. "We're supposed to be beyond that stage. 'Daggone nigger in mah store.' 'Daggone dago in mah store.' 'Daggone chink in mah store.'"

A moment later in the town restaurant the hero tried to teach the Redskin how to use a knife and fork. A frontier jeering squad at another table hooted, and the hero rose. Sock.

"Here we go," said Dr. Beck, bored by the tedium of it all. "Twenty-six punches is the national average; I counted on a few Westerns one time. But then I suppose it all illustrates it's worth making an issue over."

## Sampling the Afternoon Fare

Dr. Beck and I were sampling the late-afternoon television fare during a conference on television's influence on children, held here last week under the sponsorship of the National Council of Churches. As the father of three, I had more than a merely professional interest in discovering the impact of the electronic Pied Piper that enters 91 per cent of



homes in the United States.

Children spend one-sixth of their time watching television, more than they spend in school. The day Dr. Beck and I tuned in, more than 40 per cent of the nation's children under 12 were watching television between 5 and 6 p.m.; an even higher percentage watched that evening from 8 to 9.

They watched cartoon shows such as *Magilla Gorilla*. And they watched the silly film antics of *The Three Stooges* and other "children's" programs with live performers like Captain Tug.

But they watched adult programs as well. Surveys show that 40 per cent of the first-grader's viewing time is devoted to adult shows; sixth-graders spend 80 per cent of their television time watching adult shows.

Adult programs dominate the lists of the children's favorite programs—*The Lucy Show*, *Beverly Hillbillies*, *Family Classics* (movies), *Combat*.

## Wind Up in a Hospital

Television causes its share of society's casualties—or so some of our doctors and law-enforcement officers contend. A Winnipeg hospital complained not long ago that three children were admitted to it in a single week as a result of viewing the TV show *Outer Limits*; the hospital reported the children were "overwrought." Every now and then policemen arrest a housebreaker who tells them he first learned his technique for home entry from a television show.

What is known for certain about television as the father of mental anxiety and crime? Television producers and many psychiatrists would argue that the Winnipeg children were "overwrought" long before the television show pushed them beyond their own "outer limits." The youthful housebreakers, they would say, possess criminal tendencies anyway; if they don't learn the technique from television, they will learn it elsewhere.

What, for that matter, do we know for certain about the positive values that television inculcates in children? What do we know about the little white screen's

Please Turn to Page 12, Column 1

*Continued From First Page*  
effect on the minds of "television addicts"?

Research on children and TV, I learned here last week, is still an infant industry. A joint committee for research on television and children, financed by the television industry, the Ford Foundation, and the Foundation for Character Education, is only now organizing a systematic approach to research in the field.

But psychologists and other researchers have been making tentative forays in this field for years. From the results of these forays, and from conversations with psychologists, network researchers, and church broadcasters here, it's possible to learn some fascinating things about this relatively new and mysterious force in our culture.

Children don't always see what adults see in television programs, psychologists stress. Dr. Eleanor Maccoby, director of Stanford's Laboratory of Human Development, tells of watching a romance on television with her young daughter. In one feverish scene, the heroine ran across the room and jumped into the lap of her lover. "Oh, she's cold," her daughter exclaimed, her tone full of sympathy.

#### They Acquire Information

Children do, nevertheless, acquire an extraordinary amount of information from television, and not from "educational" shows alone. "Some people watch the news for entertainment, and some watch soap operas for information," says Dr. Joseph Clapper, director of research of Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS).

Boys pick up tips on baseball by studying Ken Boyer's stance at the plate; girls learn how to behave on a date from situation comedies or soap operas. A more extreme example: Soap-opera script writers, ill-equipped though they may be, dispensed important information to a woman who told a researcher that her daughter-in-law had just died but that a similar event in a soap opera had proved helpful. "Now I know what to say to my son," she said.

In some homes where a baby's play pen is near a television set, the baby's first word is the name of a television star or of a product being advertised.

Whether on balance television improves a child's knowledge, however, remains unknown. If they weren't watching television, they might be reading books or learning from other sources. A British research team found "a net profit only for the younger, duller children."

Does television hurt grades? One survey seemed to indicate it does; children who watched television got poorer grades than those who didn't. But closer study disclosed that the children who watched television were less intelligent to begin with; studies of children of the same level of intelligence—an I.Q. (intelligence quotient) of 110, say—indicate that whether they watch television makes little difference in grades.

Television can help a child's vocabulary, especially if he watches educational shows that make a point of spelling and

explaining words, or if he watches programs that involve spelling contests. Prof. Wilbur A. Schramm of Stanford, in *Television in the Lives of Our Children*, reports that children who grew up in a town that got a television channel soon after TV was introduced entered school with a vocabulary a year more advanced than children in a town that didn't have it. But in about three years, the vocabulary advantage disappeared.

Television seems to neither stimulate nor discourage book reading, though it has gouged the comic-book market deeply. Stanford's Dr. Maccoby believes that the time children devote to television comes largely from time earlier generations devoted to movies and radio (*Jack Armstrong* and *Little Orphan Annie*, for example) and from unorganized play time. Children do go to bed perhaps 15 or 20 minutes later than their parents did. But television takes little time from organized activities such as music lessons or basketball games and makes little difference in homework time.

I found the experts less reassuring when it comes to values and attitudes. They tell me there is some evidence that children who watch television tend more to believe that the world about them is hostile. The British survey, completed in 1958 after four years of research, found that television plays up demeanor and plays down principles: "Television plays teach that self-confidence and toughness are needed to achieve success—goodness of character is not enough. . . . Virtue seldom brings happiness in its train." Some would argue, of course, that this merely prepares children for the realities of life.

#### Breaking Down Stereotypes

Despite the Wells Fargo clichés about "redskins," the consensus among psychologists is that TV helps break down stereotyped views of some minority groups. Yet they say that in the past, anyway, it has perpetuated stereotypes of other nationalities and minorities: Germans usually seem arrogant, the French witty.

The debate over violence on TV remains as explosive as ever. Networks concede there is evidence a child is slightly more aggressive after he sees violence on TV, as one representative did last week, but they contend it's still not known whether the on-screen violence causes this condition ("at last the commercial specter raises its ugly head," whispered a skeptical man in a clerical collar in the audience). But nonindustry researchers respond, as did Dr. Maccoby, that the degree of added aggression is not slight and imply that it's difficult to attribute the greater aggressiveness to anything but the TV violence. A Stanford study completed this month reinforces this conclusion.

*Lassie*, I was surprised to learn, can disturb children far more than the Western filled with fights on the barroom floor. "The typical Western, gorged with gunfire, doesn't start children running to their local armory," Prof. Ralph Garry of Boston University has said. "It is a

well-worn ritual with all the events predictable." A show such as *Lassie*, however, in which children develop a particular attachment to a person or even a dog, can prove quite disturbing. "Let the scenes appear familiar, the actors similar to real persons in the child's life," says Professor Garry, "and one finds effects multiplying."

#### Violence Is a Part of Life

Most church officials here—like, one suspects, most P-TA leaders and others concerned over the violent fare—deny they want to banish all violence from television. "Take a show where a mother cracks her kid on the knuckles for reaching over a hot stove," said one church broadcaster last week. "That's violence, but that's love too." The churchmen know, too, that violence is part of life; for the most part, they advocate an accurate "slice of life" on television that recognizes violence and even such topics as abortion and illegitimacy.

The complaints arise over charges of excessive violence. In one episode of *The Virginian*, billed as a "family-type" show and seen by an estimated 10,000,000 children on Christmas night in 1963, there were 13 killings—9 by shooting, 2 by knives and gun butts, 1 by torture, and 1 by smothering—plus 5 additional fights and 3 assaults. When Sen. Thomas Dodd's Judiciary subcommittee investigating television and juvenile delinquency last year asked a network executive about the episode, which had been entitled "Man of Violence," he admitted "there was violence within the program. But," he added, "I would not call the program a violent program."

Perhaps not. But "Man of Violence" certainly served up an unusual "slice of life."

The Dodd subcommittee last year reported that 47 per cent of the programs



In Washington, D.C., 'Ranger Hal' amuses the children over TV.

presented during "prime viewing time" between 7 and 10 p.m. included violence. Dr. Beck, for one, finds this portion far too generous. "To repeat violence so often is to make it much more acceptable," he says. The British study concludes that "the danger lies less in imitation than in acceptance of violence as manly and inevitable."

Overlooked in all the furor over violence is the question of positive values that television may or may not inculcate. "I'm more concerned about the positive conveyance of values than about how low the bosom line is, or how long the torrid kiss," says Thomas P. Inabinett of the United Christian Missionary Society. A culture need not bludgeon itself to death, say psychologists here. It can suffocate in an atmosphere of triviality.

To get a psychologist's opinion of how well America's television culture is filtering out the trivial in its children's programs, I arranged a second viewing session with Dr. Beck, this time between 8 and 9 a.m. We started with *Captain Kangaroo*, which Dr. Beck describes as "a sort of fairy tale with live actors."

That morning Captain Kangaroo was trying, quite unsuccessfully, to resist the sales pitch of a door-to-door con artist selling 1959 calendars. The sequence ended with the portly host reading a book, *Ten Lessons on How to Say No*, in which the first chapter admonished that the first lesson was not to buy the book.

#### The Basis for a Lesson

"Sheer nonsensical joy," said Dr. Beck. "It's the incongruities the kids like." Did the sketch teach the children anything? "No, but adults could extract bits of it to develop a lesson and say, 'see?'"

A story about "Chickenlicken" followed, illustrated with simple line drawings. "I like the general feel of the program," interrupted Dr. Beck. "It's relaxed. An anxious kid could watch this program and come out feeling more relaxed."

Dr. Beck found a few moments of camera attention on a bird "superficial": "Captain Kangaroo introduces animals and birds on his show and tells you how to spell their names, but you don't learn much about them." He would prefer, too, that the leading male personalities in children's shows be dressed in more normal clothing part of the time: TV is the one place in many families where men teach preschoolers or children in the elementary grades, he reasons.

These, however, were small criticisms of a show he considers one of the finest in offering both entertainment and education. He had stored his heavy ammunition for the show that followed, *Romper Room*.

#### A Surprise of His Own

*Romper Room* is a nationally syndicated show with local "teachers" and children; the Canadian children of Toronto's *Romper Room* began the show by reciting the pledge of allegiance "... to fulfill my duty as a Canadian citizen. God is my helper." In the first min-



## Television's Romper Room: A mere 'exercise in babysitting'?

ute, a sour note crept in when a tousled boy of four or so prematurely confided to the television camera that the day's "surprise" was a turtle. "Georgie, you told them," exclaimed the teacher, horrified.

"Georgie, you naughty boy," mocked an amused Dr. Beck. "At least it indicates it's spontaneous."

Dr. Beck sees most *Romper Rooms* as "simply exercises in babysitting," ineffective in conveying positive values. "The teachers do enough to convince mothers it's worth watching—coloring, singing, marching — but it's just a trumped up way to work in commercials."

Dr. Beck would like to see children's programs subtly attack mental-health problems, such as fear of darkness, more frequently. He also would like to see more conscious efforts to inculcate moral, if not religious, values.

These are tricky areas. The Lutheran Church in America lost \$17,000 when it had to discard a pilot program for commercial TV in which it referred to God as the "heavenly father"; it realized too late that for many of the children toward which the program was aimed, "father" meant a drunken parent.

There is the problem, too, of offending persons of other faiths. "But," says Dr. Beck, "wouldn't research show at least one religiously oriented story on which the faiths could agree?"

Dr. Beck himself, a research professor connected with Oregon's educational system, is working under a grant from the U.S. Office of Education to construct a television program for preschoolers based upon current knowledge of their psychological processes. "We know the elements already, much as we know the elements in chemistry's periodic table. What we have to do is discover which elements to use to achieve both the content and the evenness we want."

Content in a children's show is important, researchers agree, but more important yet, they say, is the context in which a child watches TV. If parents help their children select the TV programs they watch, and especially if they watch the programs with the children, the values the parents inculcate help nullify television's effects. Television plays a far more penetrating role in shaping a child's values in the 40 per cent of

the homes of early elementary school children where parents never help choose the shows.

Whether we like it or not, argues Dr. Marshall McLuhan, director of the University of Toronto's communication center and author of *Understanding Mass Media*, "the electronic environment has a thousand times the power and punch of the classroom." Television demands involvement, he says, for the television image—and long-term "blur"—resembles Picasso rather than a photograph.

"Children today are in trouble when they enter the classroom," says Dr. McLuhan. "The classroom still gives them information in isolated classifications — history, mathematics, and so on. Nothing is ever related to anything. After their involvement in television, children find the classroom frustrating."

If you find Dr. McLuhan's analysis startling, as I did, you'll find his conclusions about the implications nothing short of revolutionary. "The school 'dropout' is the response of the electronic child to the fragmented curriculum," he says. To reduce the "dropout" problem and to make education more meaningful, he proposes that the classroom, not television, change.

### The Phone Call Home

Like most of the other mortals at the conference, I found myself more confused than enlightened by this visionary look into the Twenty-first Century. I can only judge by what I know, and for me the most compelling evidence of television's impact on children that I collected last week came in a long-distance phone call home.

Steve, our oldest child at 7, answered the phone. We talked of hockey games and math papers, of playing with Frisky and the chilling weather.

Then, "Dad?" His voice was tentative, polite. "Yes, Steve?"

"Oh, that's OK," he said, disclosing disappointment and a trace of impatience. "It's just that we're right in the middle of *Yogi Bear*."

There it was again. The electronic Pled Piper, working its magic. I tore the younger children away from the set briefly and then gave up. At least it helps keep the long-distance bill down.

—LEE E. DIRKS