TV for Kiddies. Truth, Goodness, Beauty—& a Little Bit of Brainwash

TWO THINGS THAT HAVE BEEN SAID about religion can also be said about television: that it is the opiate of the masses, and that it can inspire truth, goodness and beauty, or mendacity, viciousness and evil. Children who watch programs that depict positive social behavior often will act according to these examples. They can learn obedience, self-control, charity and cooperation, and they can overcome unreasonable fears—all by sitting in front of a television set.

They can learn aggression and antisocial behavior in the same way. Most research on television viewing has been concerned with the negative effects of violence. Psychologists find that a steady diet of televised gunfights, infantry attacks and felony arrests promote aggressive behavior in a child. Their evidence supports the modeling theory of development—that what you see guides what you do. As a result of such studies, concerned Congressmen have started a campaign to control television programing heavily.

But even the most violent television shows offer some examples of positive social behavior—a gunfighter may help a farmer clear his land; a G.I. may share his food with a war orphan; a detective may help a boy overcome his shyness. Psychologists have now begun to explore television's promise as a teacher of important social lessons. Their findings suggest that society will have to pay more attention to the *potential* of TV before condemning the medium entirely.

With our associates—Emily Davidson, Jae Hill and David Mott—we recently finished a series of experiments that demonstrated how a visual model could help a child reduce unreasonable fears, thus tapping the potential of the television format.

We began by working with 18 preschool boys who were inordinately afraid of dogs. In a pretest these youngsters would not approach a large German shepherd. We divided the children into two groups—one group watched a specially prepared film program about dogs, which we had made with amateur talent (shown on a rear-screen film projector that looked like a television set). The plot structure was simple: an obviously fearful young boy watched as an older lad played with a dog. Our young viewers saw that the first boy soon overcame his fear by imitating the older child; as the program ended both children were playing with the dog.

After they had seen the film, eight of nine children in the first group willingly approached the German shepherd. Less than 10 minutes of our imitation TV had helped erase long-standing fear that prevented children in the first group from playing with the dog. Children in the second group did not see the film and they retained their fear.

Dentist. Our next film, made with Richard Adelson and Antol Herskovitz, was about dental hygiene. We showed it on the rear-screen projector too. The film's plot was similar to the one about the boys with the dog. Two children—a four-year-old girl and an eight-year-old boy—visited a dentist's office. The older child fearlessly climbed into the chair to have his teeth cleaned while the younger child looked on. The younger child's fear was quite apparent at first but, again, our program showed how she gradually overcame it by imitating an older child. And, as before, we showed that fearlessness was rewarded. As the children in our program completed their treatment and climbed out of the chair, the dentist gave each a big red toothbrush.

Many different children have now seen our imitation TV program. As part of one study, we selected 15 children, four and a half to six and three fourths (the same age as the fearful girl in the film) whose mothers said they were afraid of the dentist; they either saw our film, another film, or no program. Then we showed them pictures of a dentist and two other persons selected from pictures of a physician, a fireman, a policeman and a farmer. We asked the children which of the men they would like to visit at their place of work. Children who had seen our film were much more willing to visit the dentist than were children in the other groups. (The dentist received a vote of confidence of 4.2 on a scale of six from viewers of our film, 2.6 from the control group of nonviewers and 2.2 from those who saw the other film.)

We then went on to use the film in the children's dental clinic of a large hospital where severely retarded and disturbed children are seen. Our clinical trials thus far have been extremely rewarding; three observers, a dentist and two psychologists, independently agreed

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that there had been improvement with eight of nine fearful youngsters after 10 minutes of our film treatment.

Dolphins. Robert O'Connor has conducted a similar experiment with children just entering nursery school who had grown up isolated from other children, and who did not know how to interact socially. He selected 12 students who showed marked withdrawal symptoms and divided them into two groups: The first group viewed a film about dolphins; the second group watched a film depicting appropriate social behavior in a nursery-school setting. (All saw the films on a rear-screen projector that looked like a television set.) The nursery-school film was divided into 11 scenes—in each scene a child would observe an activity, then join in, receiving some form of positive encouragement from other children or the narrator.

Each activity was more threatening than the one that preceded it in terms of vigor of play and size of the group involved. In the first scene the withdrawn child learned to share a book with a neighbor; in the last scene he joined six other children who were gleefully tossing a toy around the room.

Deficits. O'Connor then observed the two groups in the nursery-school setting. The six individuals who had seen the social-interaction film significantly increased the number and quality of their interactions with the other students. Members of the group who had seen the film about dolphins were as withdrawn as they had been at the beginning of the study. O'Connor's conclusion emphasized the potential power of television to correct behavior: "It should be noted . . . that the experiment achieved significant changes in social behavior among children with relatively severe deficits without developing a therapeutic relationship. Until recently, a fairly intimate client-therapist relationship and the attainment of insight have been considered necessary conditions of personality change. In contrast [these results, using only a film], indicate that the social behavior of children can be effectively enhanced by efforts to arrange social-stimulus conditions that may insure the acquisition of requisite competencies, the reduction of inhibiting fears, and the facilitation of appropriate responses."

Delay. A study by Aletha Stein and Lynette Friedrich has demonstrated that selective viewing can also have positive effects on the behavior of normal preschool children. Their subjects were 52 boys and 45 girls in a summer nursery school. The experimenters observed the children at play and in various other nursery-school situations for two weeks. They recorded each child's obedience to rules, his tolerance for delay ("Take a nap, then we'll play."), and his persistence at frustrating tasks. Then they divided the children into three groups. Each group watched television for 20 minutes, three times a week, for four weeks. The first group watched aggressive programs ("Batman" and "Superman"), the second watched neutral programs (children on a farm), the third watched programs that showed positive social behavior ("Misteroger's Neighborhood").

The results were clear. The children who had watched the positive programs were significantly more self-controlled in all three areas of measurement than were the children who watched the aggressive programs. Those who watched the neutral programs generally fell between the other two groups in self-control.

In addition, the children who had watched the aggressive programs displayed decreased self-control relative to their behavior at the beginning of the summer; those who watched the socially positive programs displayed increase in self-control. The experimenters achieved these effects after only four weeks—even though children in all three groups continued to watch regular television at home.

Donors. James Bryan has demonstrated that television can also shape altruistic behavior in older children. [See "How Adults Teach Hypocrisy," PT, December 1969.] Bryan showed elementary-school students a videotape in which a child gave some of his recent earnings to others who were less fortunate. Then he told his subjects that they could donate part of the money they had earned in the experiment to a charity fund. Children who had seen the videotape gave significantly more to the charity than children who had not seen the televised example.

In subsequent experiments conducted with Nancy Walbek, Bryan showed that what children see on television is more important than what they hear. The model on the videotape preached greed or charity, then made or withheld a do-

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nation. The children reacted to what the model did, not to what he said. If he made a donation, the children also were likely to make a donation, even when they heard a lecture espousing greed.

Diversion. All of this evidence suggests that what a child sees on television can significantly alter almost any aspect of his behavior. Positive lessons woven into the standard entertainment fare that youngsters see day after day can serve as a valuable prophylaxis against unwarranted fears, can teach social skills to those who have grown up in isolation, and can be a model for productive behavior. In the future, psychologists may prescribe appropriate videotape cassettes for home use by problem children. Television clearly is an effective therapist; children heed television, even when they ignore teachers and parents.

Unfortunately, television today has very little of the specialized content that produced these experimental results. Parents think of it chiefly as a form of entertainment, useful as a pacifier or babysitter. Jack Lyle and Heidi R. Hoffman interviewed the parents of some 300 first-graders and found that about one third of the parents encouraged their children to watch television just to keep them quiet and occupied. An even larger percentage of the parents—almost 50 percent—used viewing privileges as a reward or punishment.

Devotion. Lyle also noted that the average family TV set is turned on more than six hours a day, seven days a week. Children usually start to watch television before they are three; they soon are addicted. Eighty-two percent of all five-year-olds are regular tube viewers. Children get up early in the morning to watch television before they leave for school; literally millions of children under the age of 12 are still viewing television as late as 10 o'clock on week nights. Television is so pervasive that a child born today will spend more of his waking time in front of a TV set than anywhere else—including school—until he is 18.

With these facts in mind, educators and television executives have recognized the potential of the medium as a teaching tool. Shows designed as alternate classrooms can be very effective. Samuel Ball and Gerry A. Bogatz analyzed the first year of "Sesame Street" for the Educational Testing Service in Princeton. They tested viewers and concluded: "From this evaluation of 'Sesame Street,' television has been shown to work extremely well as a teaching medium. It achieved this result not only in learnings that involve simple association (for example, naming letters) but also in learning that involves complex cognitive processes (sorting and classifying), and even verbalization of these processes. In open competition with other television shows, it achieved this result through a program that attracted and held the attention of the viewers."

Drama. But television can be a teacher in another less obvious way. Observers such as James Coleman have noted that television has produced an information-rich culture [see "The Children Have Outgrown the Schools," PT, February 1972]. Research shows that a child's vocabulary and general storehouse of facts can increase through exposure to television entertainment. And at the same time that the medium teaches a child it can whet his appetite for further study of almost any topic—foreign lands, cooking, drugs, or sex—depending, of course, on what he sees. Coleman declared that schools must stop teaching "information" and instead, train children to handle the flood of information that television supplies. And at first glance the information seems somewhat random and useless. For example, television viewing produces a heightened ability to identify brand names and packages of products that are advertised. Three quarters of the mothers in the Lyle and Hoffman study reported that their children sang commercial jingles that they heard on television. Adults, too, simply pick up information. Leonard LoSciuto gave 512 people a quiz on television trivia, finding that many displayed unusual knowledge—they could recognize political candidates and they knew that the weather moves from West to East and that cloudiness follows low-pressure systems. Television conveys such information in ceaseless repetition.

Television also can transmit attitudes and prejudices. Many years ago Alberta Siegel showed that even very brief dramatic presentations could exert a significant influence on the real-life expectations of second-graders. She noted that "when Eastern children, especially those from urban areas, vacation in the West,

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they often expect ranch hands to behave like the cowboys they have seen so often in Westerns on TV and at the movies. Their fearful expectations of Indians reflect their faithful acceptance of the portrayals of Indians in these same sources. Closer to home, children commonly fear policemen, and this may, in part, be a result of their acceptance of the mass-media stereotyped portrayal of policemen."

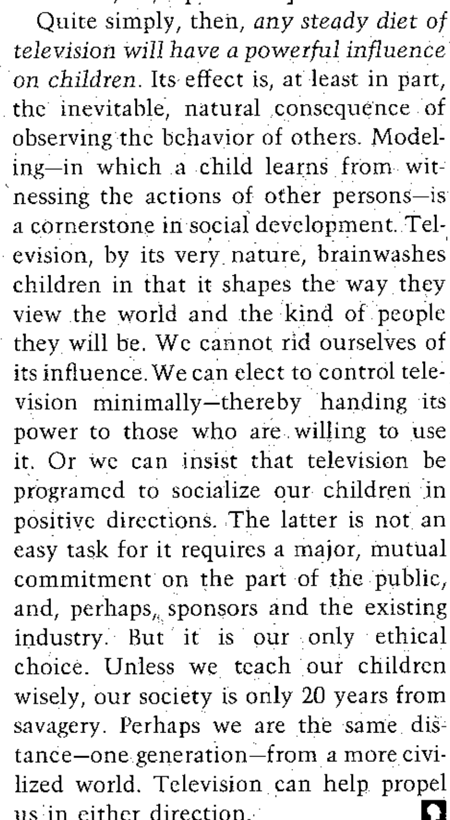
Deception. Stereotypes of cowboys and Indians are not the only unfortunate effects of some TV views of man. Children react to simple-minded stereotypes in entertainment and to blatant deception in advertising. Lyle and Hoffman asked some 600 white sixth-graders how well they thought television depicted minority groups. A majority of the sixth-graders thought that television was unfair to blacks and Chicanos; about 25 percent of the respondents felt that this was the case most or all of the time.

Scott Ward investigated youths' reactions to TV advertising and concluded that "Generally, adolescents are quite cynical about television advertising, feeling that commercials (are) often hypocritical . . . the bases of their negative attitudes are along dimensions of trust, truthfulness, straightforwardness."

Heavy exposure to violent entertainment fare is also linked to the young viewer's attitude toward violence and aggression. Joseph Dominick and Bradley Greenberg recorded the amount of time that 434 boys and 404 girls in elementary school spent watching television, then compared it with their answers to a questionnaire about violence. They found that students who watched more aggressive television were more likely to approve of violence, thought that it was an effective solution to a variety of situations, and were willing to use violence in conflict situations. The Dominick-Greenberg findings for both boys and girls showed that "for relatively average children from average home environments—continued exposure to violence is related to acceptance of aggression as a mode of behavior."

Drift. Jennie McIntyre and James Teevan have emphasized the potential impact of violent television on children: "Adolescents who watch violent programs . . . may learn about patterns of behavior which then are available for use when an appropriate occasion arises. What could have more important long-term consequences, both for the individual and for the society, then, may be the attitudes formed about violence. If the adolescent views violent program content and begins to believe that violence is a usual rather than an extraordinary means of achieving goals and that many people apparently approve of such means then he too may be more likely to approve of such behavior. If he has not yet acted out this behavior, he may be more tolerant of others' violence and less ready to interfere, come to the rescue of a victim, or be concerned about the fate of others. On a societal level, an entire population may become indifferent to large-scale violence or may approve the use of indiscriminate mass violence."

The Surgeon General of the United States, Jesse L. Steinfeld, recently released the report of his advisory committee on television and children's aggression. Despite some unwarranted hedging by the committee, consensus in the supporting research documents clearly showed a link between viewing of television violence and aggressive behavior. [For a more complete review of the Surgeon General's report see "TV Violence and Child Aggression: Snow on the Screen," by Robert M. Liebert and John M. Neale, PT, April 1972.]



Quite simply, then, *any steady diet of television will have a powerful influence on children.* Its effect is, at least in part, the inevitable, natural consequence of observing the behavior of others. Modeling—in which a child learns from witnessing the actions of other persons—is a cornerstone in social development. Television, by its very nature, brainwashes children in that it shapes the way they view the world and the kind of people they will be. We cannot rid ourselves of its influence. We can elect to control television minimally—thereby handing its power to those who are willing to use it. Or we can insist that television be programed to socialize our children in positive directions. The latter is not an easy task for it requires a major, mutual commitment on the part of the public, and, perhaps, sponsors and the existing industry. But it is our only ethical choice. Unless we teach our children wisely, our society is only 20 years from savagery. Perhaps we are the same distance—one generation—from a more civilized world. Television can help propel us in either direction.

SENATOR [JOHN O.] PASTORE: And you are convinced, like the Surgeon General, that we have enough data now [about the effects of television on children] to take action?
DR. [ELI] RUBINSTEIN [Vice-Chairman, Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior]: I am, sir.
SENATOR PASTORE: Without a re-review. It will only substantiate the facts we already know. Irrespective of how one or another individual feels, the fact still remains that you are convinced, as the Surgeon General is convinced, that there is a causal relationship between violence on television and social behavior on the part of children?
DR. RUBINSTEIN: I am, sir.
SENATOR PASTORE: I think we ought to take it from there. . . .
—(Hearings before the Subcommittee on Communications of the Committee on Commerce, United States Senate, 92nd Congress, March 21 through 24, 1972, page 152.)