

# The State of Children's Television: An Examination of Quantity, Quality, and Industry Beliefs

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# Summary

The research reported in “The State of Children’s Television: An Examination of Quantity, Quality and Industry Beliefs” has brought us closer to understanding how much children’s television programming is available, how much of what is available is high quality, enriching programming, and where and when the high quality programs can be found. It also points to the difficulties broadcasters face in creating and distributing economically viable educational programs.

Some highlights & recommendations:

✧ **There is a good deal of high quality programming generally available.** Unfortunately, many of the high quality programs are aired on basic or premium cable television. Since approximately 1/3 of children ages 2-11 do not have access to cable television (A.C. Nielsen), millions of parents and children have to rely on broadcast television for their educational programming needs.

✧ **The preschool audience is fairly well-served.** Content analyses indicate that commercial broadcasters, public broadcasters and cable channels all do a nice job offering programs that contain social and academic lessons in a high quality format. The results of our national survey indicate that parents are, for the most part, pleased with what is available to their preschool child.

✧ **Six to eleven year olds get the lion’s share of programs, but these are more likely to be low quality programs.** A large number of the commercially broadcast programs for children in this target age have little educational value—they are violent, stereotypical and lacking in diversity and production value. Our survey indicates that parents are not pleased with what is available for their older children. Content analyses indicate that their concerns may be justified.

✧ **Industry experts argue that advertisers want the largest possible audience, and programmers and producers believe the way that to obtain it is to program for entertainment more so than education and for 6-11 year old boys.** Ratings data would seem to support their contention. The highest rated programs are those that feature male superheroes and are action and adventure-oriented (e.g., Power Rangers, Spiderman, Batman & Robin).

✧ **Broadcasters’ beliefs about what attracts the largest audience may create a self- fulfilling prophecy.** High quality programs for the desirable 6-11 year old audience are typically buried in the schedule (very early in the morning or weekend afternoons). Boy-oriented, violence-laden programs dominate the more favorable parts of the schedule to such a degree that it is unusual to find programs that are girl-oriented or even gender-neutral.

⊕ **Programmers believe that educationally-oriented programming is less economically viable (that is, difficult for them to reach a large audience at a low per capita cost). They argue that:**

- Good educational programming, by definition, requires a smaller target age. (As a result, a science program will necessarily have a narrower appeal than a superhero cartoon.)
- Educational programs are more expensive than entertainment programs.
- Purchasing new educational programs or shifting to a different production source may be costly for programmers who have existing libraries of children's shows or are connected (through contract or ownership) with entertainment-oriented production houses.
- Programs that hold interest for limited segments of the audiences will disrupt the "flow" of the schedule and threaten to hurt the ratings of programs that air before and after the less popular educationally-oriented program.

⊕ **Including high quality, educationally-oriented programs in the menu for children needs to be seen as economically justified and will require the cooperation of the many people who are involved in children's television:**

- Advertisers should recognize that who is in the audience matters as much as how many are in the audience. The child audience, like the adult audience, consists of individuals with varied interests, developmental levels, and viewing preferences.
- Broadcasters should see the "image" benefit that can follow from high quality programs for children. Our survey found that both parents and children listed channels nearly as often as they listed specific shows when asked, "Can you think of a good program for children."
- Parents need to be informed about the quality programs that are available for their children in order to more effectively guide their children's choices.
- Children should be encouraged to become active viewers—deliberate in their program selections and critical of the material they see on television.

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## *Foreword*

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**T**he Annenberg Public Policy Center was established by publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg in 1994 to create a community of scholars within the University of Pennsylvania which would address public policy issues at the local, state and federal levels. Consistent with the mission of the Annenberg School for Communication, the Center has four ongoing foci: Information and Society; Media and the Developing Mind; Media and the Dialogue of Democracy; and Health Communication. Each year, as well, a special area of scholarly and social interest is addressed. The Center supports research and sponsors lectures and conferences in these areas. This series of publications disseminates the work of the Center.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson  
Director

# INTRODUCTION

Children love television. The latest Nielsen data indicate that children ages 2-11 spend an average of 19.5 hours a week watching it (A.C. Nielsen, April, 1996). But as a society we have mixed feelings about the time children spend with TV. On the one hand, there is evidence that watching some television can be beneficial. An average daily diet of one to two hours of TV viewing has been correlated with higher academic achievement, especially for younger children (Comstock, 1991). Researchers have also found that quality programs can make children more accepting of others of different races (Mays, Henderson, Seidman, & Steiner, 1975); less sex-role stereotyped (Davidson, Yasuna and Tower, 1979); and generally more pro-social in their behaviors (Hearold, 1986).

On the other hand, there's evidence that some sorts of viewing may be cause for concern. Many studies indicate that children's viewing of violent television can lead them to become more aggressive (see Donnerstein, Slaby, & Eron, 1994 for one of hundreds of studies done in this area). Boys over the age of 10 are especially vulnerable to the effects of violent TV (Hearold, 1986). Research also indicates that watching too much television may cause schoolwork to suffer (Comstock, 1991) and may lead to depression in children (Kubey & Czikszentimihalyi, 1990).

The good news/bad news scenario has given rise to widespread ambivalence over the relationship between children and television. Concerned parents have begun advocacy organizations such as Action for Children's Television (ACT), founded by a group of Boston mothers in 1968 and headed by Peggy Charren, now a Visiting Scholar at Harvard University. Groups such as ACT and its successor, the Center for Media Education, have sought to raise public awareness about the effects of television viewing and have pressured both the broadcasters and the FCC to do more in the way of positive programming for children.

## *The Regulation of Children's Television: A Brief History*

The controversy over children and television has raged for at least three decades. Turow (1981) writes that the early days of the medium saw plenty of programs geared to children (in the hope that child viewers would badger their parents into buying TV sets). Over the years, child-oriented programs were slowly replaced with programs for adults (in the hope that adult audiences could lure more advertisers). By the 1970's the lack of quality and quantity in children's programming led the public and advocacy groups to pressure the FCC to step in. The FCC responded in 1974 by issuing guidelines calling upon broadcasters to make a "meaningful effort" to provide a "reasonable amount" of educational programming for children (in Kunkle & Canepa, 1994). The hope was that broadcasters would improve

the quantity and quality of children's programming voluntarily. The FCC warned broadcasters that if they didn't do so, stricter rules would be forthcoming.

The result? By 1978 children's programming had not improved. ACT petitioned the FCC to conduct inquiry into compliance with the 1974 Policy Statement and within the year the FCC had concluded that broadcasters had not met their obligations and recommended regulatory action. The Commission proposed a minimum weekly requirement of children's programming (5 hours of educational programming for preschoolers and 2 1/2 hours of educational programming for school aged children). It also proposed defining "educational" as programs that addressed "history, science, literature, the environment, drama, music, fine arts, human relations, other cultures and languages, and basic skills such as reading and mathematics."

Before any specific regulations could be put into place, a new FCC Chair, Mark Fowler, was appointed by Ronald Reagan. Fowler believed that the marketplace, not regulation, was the most appropriate means by which to control the content of television—for children or otherwise. He argued that the new technologies—such as cable and VCRs—effectively increased the number of children's programs. As the threat of regulation disappeared, so too did most of the network broadcasting of educational programming for children (Kerkman, Kunkel, Huston, Wright & Pinon, 1990; Wartella, Heintz, Aidman, & Mazzarella, 1990).

Undeterred, advocates took up the cause with congressional leaders and ultimately gained passage of a piece of legislation known as the Children's Television Act of 1990. Unlike other efforts at regulation, this bill emerged from Congress as an amendment to the Communications Act (although its implementation was left to the Federal Communications Commission). Essentially, the CTA mandates that broadcasters serve the "educational/informational needs of children through the licensee's overall programming, including programming specifically designed to serve such needs." Educational/informational programming is broadly defined as content that will "further the positive development of the child in any respect, including the child's cognitive/intellectual or emotional/social needs." Left undefined, however, are issues such as how much programming is enough; how age-specific the programming needs to be; when the programming should be aired. It also leaves the identification of children's educational programming up to the licensees (Kunkle & Canepa, 1994).

It is not clear whether the Children's Television Act has dramatically changed what is available to children on the commercial airwaves. In the most comprehensive study of license renewal applications to date, Kunkle & Canepa (1994) found inconsistencies in how licensees submitted their applications (e.g., some stations made no direct reference to the FCC's criterion or failed to offer any support at all for their claim that their programming fit the requirements of the CTA). They also found some evidence for the Center for Media Education's contention that stations were submitting questionable programs as so-called educational shows for children. For example, the researchers found *Beetlejuice*, *GI Joe*, *Land of the Lost*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* listed as educational programs (1994:406).



## *Children's Television: Where We Are Today*

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Efforts made to regulate children's television are based on the notion that broadcasters are given licenses to "serve in the public interest" (FCC, 1934) and that part of what serving the public interest means is providing children with educational content in one form or another (as programs, public service announcements, classroom tie-ins). This latter assumption—that parents and children want educational programs — is one that is rarely questioned except by broadcasters, who argue that educational programs get few viewers, and kill ratings for programs that are aired before and after them.

Efforts made to deregulate children's television are based on assumptions too—specifically, if children's television doesn't make good market sense, then it is unfair (unconstitutional!) to force the issue. Proponents of deregulation believe that demand for educational children's television can be satisfied through cable television. The assumption here—that children have equal access to educational fare on cable—is contested by advocates who point out that there is a social class bias in who can pay monthly bills for cable service.

To create a base of information on which this debate can stand, this report will seek to answer the following questions:

- 1) How much programming designed specifically for children is available to them on the commercial and public airwaves and on basic and premium cable television?
- 2) How much of what is available to children can be classified as quality programming (programs that are, in some way, enriching)?
- 3) What are children's viewing preferences?
- 4) How do parents and children feel about television in general and about the quality and quantity of programs available for children?
- 5) How do those involved in children's television (cable and network executives, advertisers, producers, advocates) feel about the current state of children's television and what is the conventional wisdom about the child audience?
- 6) What conditions foster quality programs in an increasingly competitive environment?

The data for this report come from four sources: a content analysis of three days of children's programs (Saturday, Sunday, Monday); a national telephone survey of 1205 parents and 308 children (conducted in May, 1996); interviews with 16 individuals representing various interests in children's television (network & cable representatives, advertisers, producers, promoters, advocates) (conducted in March, April and May, 1996), and Nielsen ratings data (for March, 1996).

# WHAT'S AVAILABLE TO CHILDREN: THE LAY OF THE LAND

Three days of children's television programs in the Philadelphia market were gathered: Saturday, April 13, 1996; Sunday, April 14, 1996 and Monday, April 15, 1996. Although these days were not randomly selected, they were chosen as representative of what is typically available to children on weekends and weekdays during the school year. (We consciously tried to avoid "Sweeps" and holidays.) Programs were identified as "children's programs" if they were so labeled by the TV Guide or by Nielsen (the broadcasters provide the labels). All channels that were available to Philadelphians were monitored. They included the commercial network, weblet and independent stations, public broadcasters, basic cable, and premium cable channels. Only programs aired on a regular basis were included. Movies and specials were excluded from the sample.

A total of 386 programs for children were identified for taping. As one might imagine, the logistics of taping such a large number of programs over three days presented quite a challenge. It took three practice runs to get the kinks worked out and even then, approximately 5% of the programs listed were not recorded due to technical difficulties. Of these 20 programs that were not recorded, 19 were basic cable (including the Family Channel, The Learning Channel) and one was a network program (NBC).[1] Two other programs were also not included because they were in Spanish. Other programs may have been inadvertently omitted because they could not be recognized as children's programs (for example, The Simpsons) or because they were not listed in the TV Guide. A final sample of 366 children's programs is used for the analysis. Although they do not represent all programs available to children in a given week (some programs were preempted, some programs air on other weekdays), this is a large and representative sample which permits us to draw some preliminary conclusions about what is available and how much of what is available is quality programming.

Each program was coded for the following variables: station airing program, length of program, time of day aired, date aired. Since there were multiple airings of the same program (albeit different episodes), single examples (n=198) of programs were coded for the following variables and replicated for the multiple airings: targeted age group, genre, presence of positive lessons, salience of lessons, diversity of characters, production value, age appropriateness, stereotyping, violence, sex/sexual innuendo, language, unsafe activities, presence of different kinds of lessons and subjective quality. Five individuals (the author, three female undergraduate students, one male graduate student) coded the programs. They were trained by the author over the course of two days until consensus was reached in how to define the variables and how to code the programs.

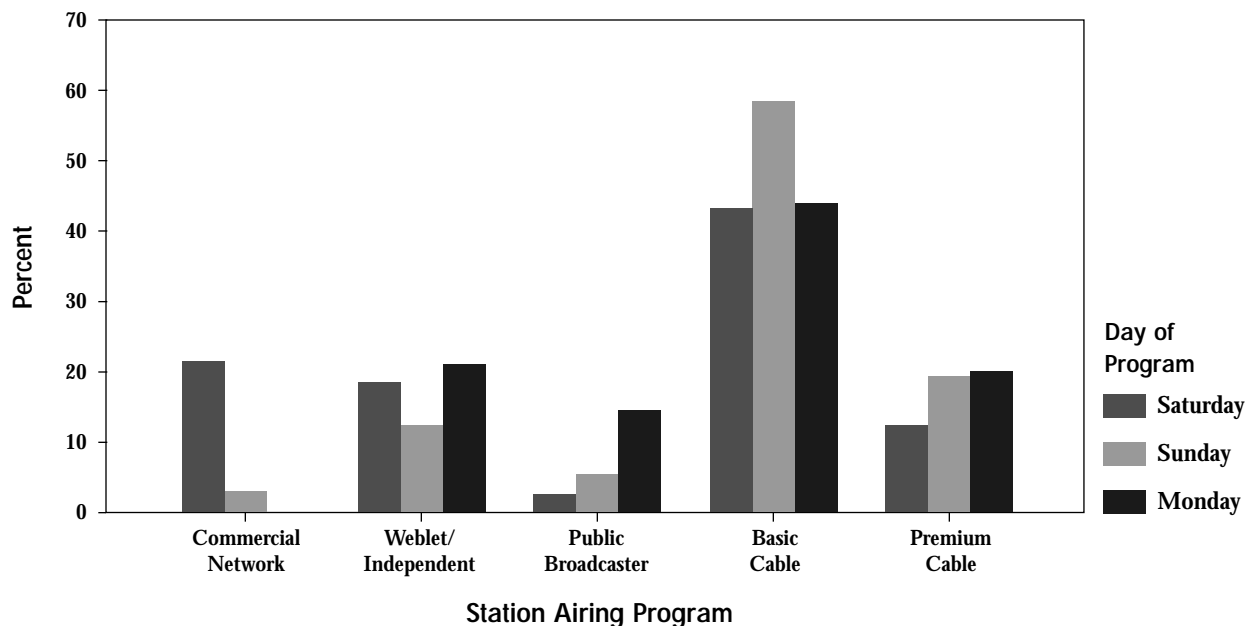
## When are children's programs available?

Programs for children were distributed nearly equally across the three sampled days. Thirty four percent (n=126) were aired on Saturday, 29% (n=106) were aired on Sunday, and 36% (n=134) were aired on Monday.

On the weekends, children have more programs to choose from if they watch in the hours before noon. Roughly two thirds of the programs on Saturday and Sunday are shown between 6am and 12pm. The few programs that are available after that are spread fairly evenly across the day. Weekdays represent a different story. About a third of Monday's programs are shown before school (prior to 9am) another 30% are shown during the day (between 9am and 3pm) and 30% are shown in the after-school hours (3pm-6pm).

There are significant differences in when the various stations air their children's programs.[2] Eighty seven percent of the "big three" network programs for children aired on Saturday morning, 13% aired on Sunday, and no programs aired on Monday. As early as the 1970's, commercial broadcasters have confined their children's programs to a time slot in which they knew children would be awake and in search of entertainment—a period that came to be known as the Saturday morning ghetto. A look at the data reveals that ABC, CBS, NBC are sticking to this tradition. Alternatively, two-thirds of the programs aired on public stations were shown on Monday and 42% of programs aired on the "other" commercial broadcast stations (UPN, WB, Fox) were aired on Monday. Cable programs were spread pretty evenly across the three days.

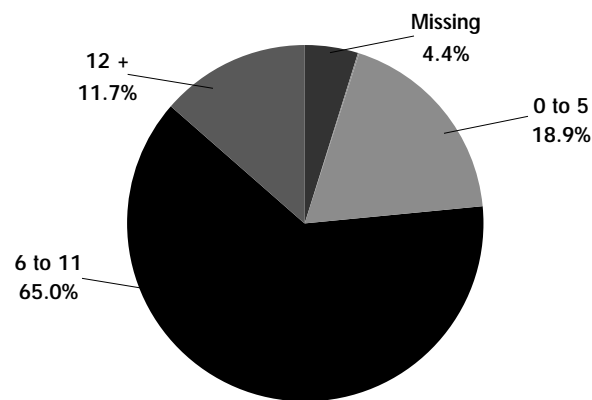
**Figure 1** When Stations Air Programs



## Who is addressed by the programs?

Each of the programs coded was given a target age label: 2-5 (preschooler), 6-11 (school age), 12+ (adolescent). Target age ranges used in the coding are based on the standard Nielsen and industry breakdowns. Coders indicated that it was sometimes difficult to tell the target audience for programs. They were instructed to examine the time slot, the age of the characters and the level of the material to determine target age. Many programs, however, had numerous jokes and allusions that would clearly go over the head of any child (even though it was specifically labeled a children's program). Some programs were obviously designed for teenagers but were shown at 6:30 on a Saturday morning (when it was very unlikely that any teen would be awake). Out of the 366 programs, 16 of the shows (or 4.4%) could not be coded for target age.

Figure 2 Target Ages for Programs

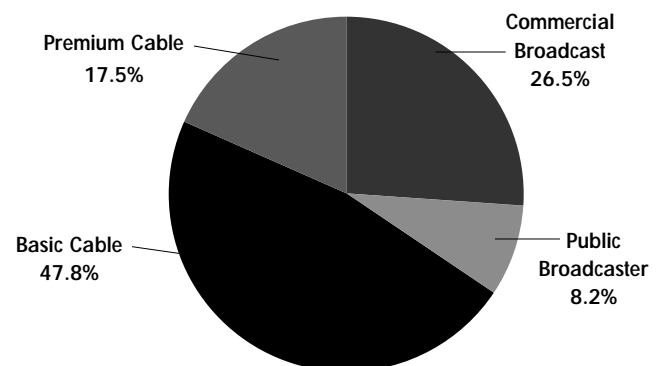


Programs available to children are more likely to be targeted to the 6-11 year old audience than any other audience. Of those programs that could be coded for target age, 20% were for preschoolers, 68% were for school age children and 12% were for adolescents. It may be that the school age category was artificially inflated because it acted as a default for programs that were difficult to assess. However, interviews with industry executives indicate that broadcasters consciously target 6-11 year olds, knowing that they are heavier viewers than adolescents. They also believe that while preschoolers will watch "older" shows, the school age child will not watch "younger" programs.

## Where are the programs for children located?

Of all the programs that are available to children, roughly one quarter can be found on commercial broadcast stations (8.5% on ABC, CBS, NBC and 18.5% on the UPN, FOX and WB affiliates). Another 8% are broadcast on public stations. The remaining 65% can be found on cable channels (48% on basic cable and 17.5% on premium channels).

Figure 3 Distribution of Children's Programs by Station



# HOW MUCH QUALITY IS THERE IN TELEVISION PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN?

There is a large quantity of children's television (in this sample of three days: 198 different titles and 366 individual programs). Although many of these programs are concentrated in the cable sector (about 65%), there are significant numbers of programs available to children over the free commercial and public airwaves. It is important to determine, however, how much of what is available to children on television can be classified as "quality" and whether the "quality programs" are equally available to different audiences (children of different ages, children without access to cable).

## *Defining Quality*

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The challenge of defining "quality" has been a large part of the debate surrounding children's television programming. The Children's Television Act of 1990 says that serving the child audience means providing educational/informational programming— content that would "further the positive development of the child in any respect, including the child's cognitive/intellectual or emotional/social needs." In all its efforts to increase the amount and quality of children's programs, the FCC has itself never tried to judge quality. In this research, we have attempted to develop a definition of quality that could be operationalized and applied to a wide variety of programs. We wanted a measure that would be sensitive to the different approaches producers take to creating "enriching" programs. We also wanted a measure that would assess more than whether a program had a lesson, but also whether programs included positive elements and avoided negative content.

This was certainly a judgement call. There are many programs that have relevant social messages but that also show characters engaged in aggressive and unsafe behaviors. Were our only criterion "the inclusion of a positive lesson," a program that is twenty minutes of violence and three minutes of pro-social content — (e.g., *The Power Rangers*)—would be labeled a high quality program. In the end, we were looking for ways to assess the extent to which the "good stuff" (see below) outweighed the "bad stuff." This approach may not have always worked perfectly. For example, *Captain Planet*, which has been labeled a "quality program" by some industry insiders, contains both violent content and extended segments of positive content. It remains to be seen how best to assess the balance of positive program attributes with potentially problematic program content.

Another problem with the quality labeling of programs is the fact that the label is given after the viewing of only one episode. Many of the programs that exist for children are "uneven." That is, there are programs that are strong one week and weak the next. Were these labels intended to "stick"—that is,

were we to make long term recommendations to parents and children about what to watch and what to avoid, we would certainly need to examine more than one episode of any given program.

## ***Measuring Quality***

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Two measures were ultimately developed to judge the quality of a program. The first is a “quality index.” The index consists of ten program elements that contribute to or detract from the level of quality in a television program for children. The elements are derived from three sources: the literature on the effects of television on children; interviews with advocates and people in “the business,” and our own intuitive sense of what constitutes a quality program.

### **Quality Contributors**

The quality of a program is enhanced when it...

...has content that is understandable and appropriate for the target audience (age appropriate);

...has an enriching or pro-social lesson or theme that is clear and understandable (lesson);

...makes the lesson integral to the story and/or is pervasive throughout the program (salience of lesson);

...speaks to many children through diversity in its characters (diversity);

...is creative and engaging in its techniques and its storytelling devices (production value).

### **Quality Detractors**

The quality of a program suffers when it contains:

... verbal or physical violence;

... sex or sexual innuendo;

... gender, ethnic or racial stereotyping;

... “bad” language;

... uncontradicted images of characters engaged in unsafe behaviors.

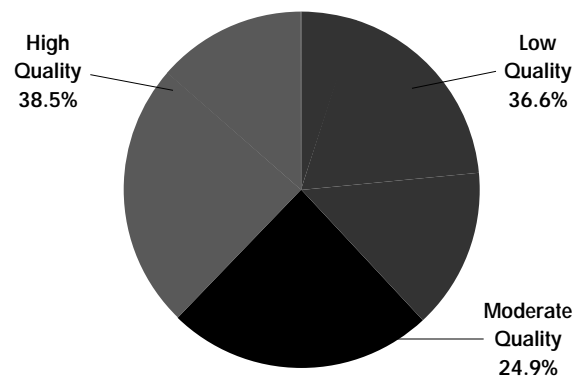
Together, the “quality contributors” and the “quality detractors” make up a “quality index.” Each program received points for including the quality contributors and received points for excluding the quality detractors. The higher the score, the better the program.

We were warned by many in the industry and many who have studied children’s television that an objective index measure may obscure some of the more subtle strengths and weaknesses of a program. A program, for example, may “add up” as a good program but not be very worthwhile. Conversely, a program might receive a less than ideal score but be a terrific program. As a result, we included a second, subjective measure of quality. At the end of viewing, coders rated the program as “negative” (a program you would likely discourage a child from watching); “neutral” (a program you would neither encourage nor discourage a child from watching); or “positive” (a program you would likely encourage a child to watch).

The two quality measures were weighted equally and programs received a final quality score. Programs were placed in one of three categories: “low quality;” “moderate quality;” and “high quality.” “Low quality” programs were typically entertainment programs with little educational value and substantial amounts of violence, stereotyping and other problematic content; “moderate quality” programs were usually entertainment programs with little educational value but also little problematic content; and “high quality” shows were most often programs that had positive educational (in the broad sense of the word) value in an entertaining format. A listing of the “high quality” programs identified in this sample can be found in Appendix 1 of this report.[3]

In looking at the total number of programs (n=366) available over the three days, 37% of the programs were judged to be of “low quality”, 25% were judged to be of “moderate quality”, and 38% were judged to be of “high quality.”

**Figure 4 Quality of Programs for Children**



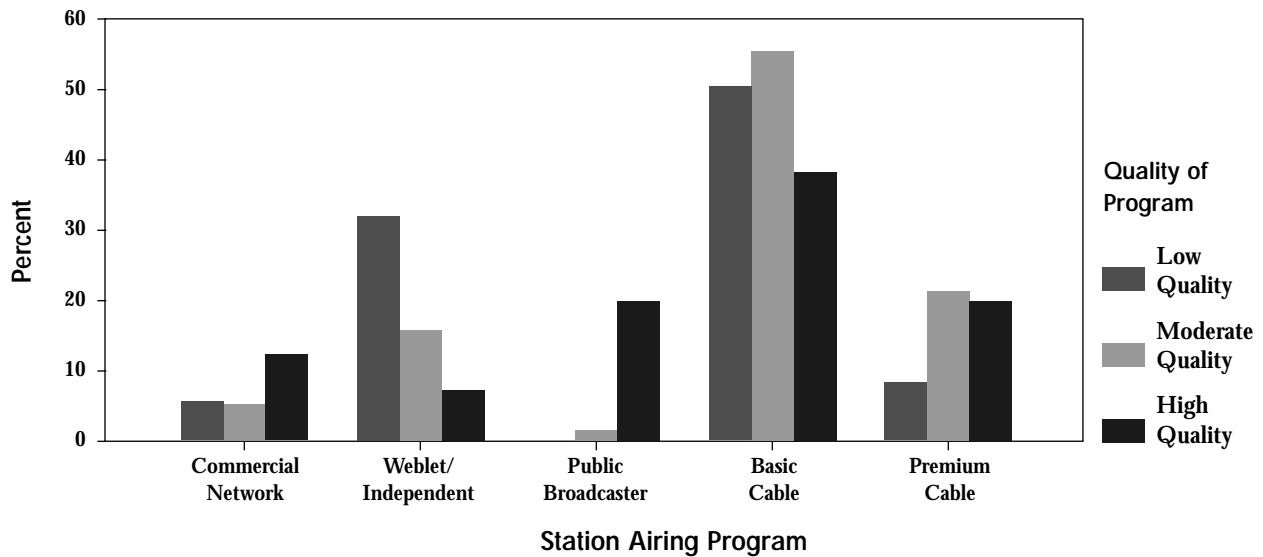
### ***Who carries the quality programs?***

The data indicate that the majority of high quality programs in this sample are on cable (38% on basic and 21% on premium). Because cable airs more than half of all programs for children, however, cable channels also carry the majority of low quality programs (52% basic and 10% premium).

There were significant differences in the ratio of low, moderate and high quality programs by station.[4] In this analysis, PBS comes out on top (97% of their programs are high quality and 3% are moderate quality). Premium cable also has a large percentage of high quality programs in its children’s lineup (47% are high quality, 31% are moderate quality and 22% are low quality).

Basic cable did not fare as well. Thirty percent of basic cable programs were high quality, 30% were moderate quality, and 40% were low quality. Commercial broadcasters made the poorest showing. Twenty nine percent of their programs were high quality, 20% were moderate quality and a full 51% were low quality.

**Figure 5 Quality of Programs in Different Venues**



It appears that channels have begun to be “tagged” as child-friendly islands in a sea of television. Results of the May, 1996 telephone survey conducted for the Annenberg Public Policy Center by Peter Hart Research indicate that parents and children have a sense of where they can turn for quality children’s programs. When parents were asked: “Where do you think the best programs for children and young people can be found on television?” 57% chose public broadcasting stations, 29% listed cable-only channels and only 6% chose commercial broadcast networks (the remainder said they were all equal or they weren’t sure). Similarly, when asked “Could you give me some examples of good programs for children age six through eleven?” many parents responded by listing a particular channel rather than a program. For example, 10% of the parents said “Nickelodeon,” 9% said shows on “The Discovery Channel,” and 3% said “shows on PBS.”

Children, who are likely to be working under a different set of criteria, were also asked “Where do you think the best programs for young people like you can be found on television?” Most (44%) said cable-only channels had the best programs, followed by commercial broadcast networks (32%) and public broadcasting (19%). (Here, it is important to point out that the children surveyed were ages 10-17). Like the parents, children also listed channels in addition to programs when asked about their favorite shows (12% listed Nickelodeon; 16% listed ABC’s TGIF; and 10% listed MTV).



## ***Who are the quality programs for?***

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In looking at the high quality programs, it appears that the 6-11 year olds are significantly more likely to be the target audience than younger or older audiences. [5] Six to eleven year olds are the potential audience for 47% of the high quality programs while preschoolers and adolescents have significantly fewer programs that appear to be meant for them (39% and 14%, respectively).

Yet the results of our survey indicate that parents have a more favorable view of programming available for preschoolers than for those ages 6 to 11. Sixty five percent of the parents surveyed felt that preschoolers had the best programs, while only 15% felt that school age children had the best programs and 10% felt that adolescents had the best programs (the rest felt that they were equally good or bad or were not sure).

For another perspective, one can also look at the distribution of high, moderate and low quality programming available to each target audience:

### **Of all the programs available to preschoolers (2-5):**

12% were low quality

13% were moderate quality

75% were high quality

### **Of all the programs available to school age children (6-11);**

48% were low quality

26% were moderate quality

26% were high quality

### **Of all the programs available to adolescents (12+);**

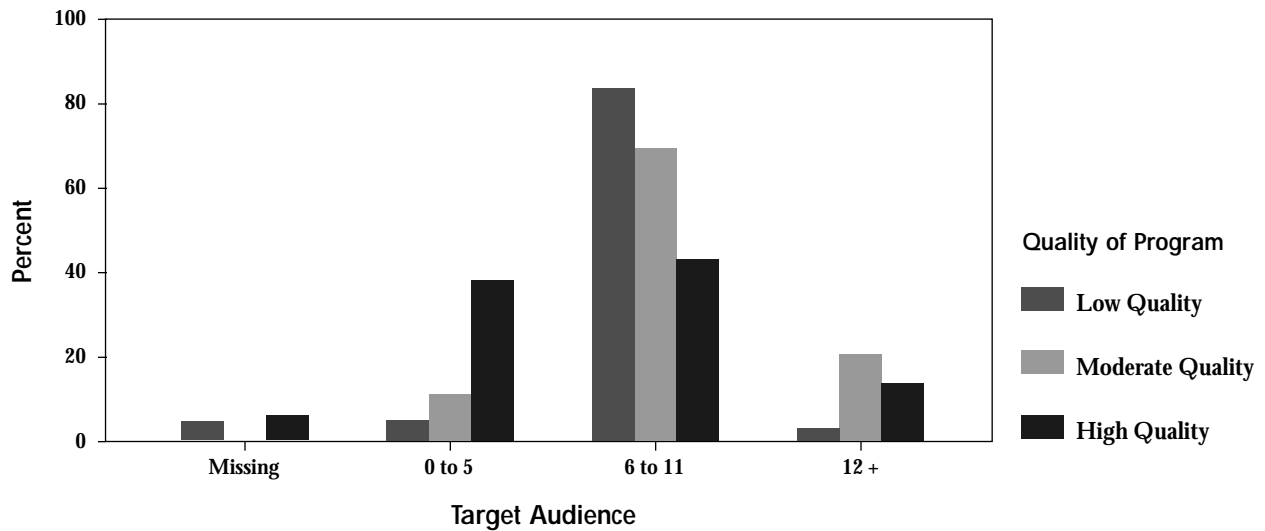
12% were low quality

46% were moderate quality

42% were high quality

So while the 6-11 age group has the most programs available to it, it is significantly more likely to have low quality and significantly less likely than other age groups to have high quality programs available to them.

**Figure 6 Target Ages for Quality Programs**



A look at when the high quality programs are on indicates that for Saturday and Sunday the early morning hours (before 9:00 am) are most heavily populated with high quality programs (50% Saturday; 49% Sunday) while the “prime” late morning hours are most heavily populated with low quality programs (51% Saturday, 44% Sunday). These differences were significant for Saturday[6] , although not for Sunday.

Weekdays (Monday in this case) show a similar pattern of airing low quality programs when school age children are in the audience. The time when children are watching before school (early morning) indicates that more than half the programs airing are low quality programs. Once the school age kids leave the house, and preschoolers become the main audience, the number of high quality programs shoots up (55% late morning and 65% midday). When the school age children return, the low quality programs reappear (44% late afternoon, 44% evening). These differences were significant. [7]

So again, parents’ concerns over their 6-11 year olds’ viewing seems warranted. The times when pre-schoolers are watching (assuming they are early risers and they are home during the day) are times when high quality, age-appropriate programs are aired. The times when school age children are watching, however, (later morning, after school) are times when low quality programs are more likely to be aired.

## INTERPRETING THE DATA: WHAT THE NUMBERS MEAN

These 366 children's television programs represent (with some qualifications) what is available to children in a major urban market on a typical weekend and a typical weekday. What we've learned from the content analysis of these programs is:

There is a large number of programs available to children, an even larger number available to children who have access to cable, and a very large number of programs available to children in homes that subscribe to premium cable channels. Although all three age groups (2-5, 6-11, 12+) had programs that appeared designed for them, the 6-11 year olds had the lion's share.

Using both an "objective" index and a "subjective" measure to assess quality, it could be argued that 37% of all children's programs in this sample are "low quality," 25% are "moderate quality," and 38% are "high quality." High quality programs tended to be concentrated in the cable sector and on the PBS channels. Only one fifth of the high quality programs were located on the commercial broadcast channels. Even more telling was the ratio of high quality programs to moderate and low quality programs for each channel. Given its mission, it was not surprising to find that 97% of all PBS programs for children were high quality. Premium cable also had a large percentage of high quality programs (47%), followed by basic cable (30%), and commercial broadcasters (29%). Former FCC Chairman Fowler's prediction that cable would take on the role of providing children's programming appears to have come to fruition in 1996.

If many of the high quality programs available are on basic and premium cable channels, do most children have access to them? The most recent Nielsen data (April, 1996) indicates that about two-thirds of children ages 2-11 and 12+ have access to cable (63.2% and 62.3%, respectively). The remaining American children have access to commercial broadcast television, which is predominantly low quality, and public television, which (proportionally speaking) they will have outgrown by the time they get to first grade.

The preschool audience seems to be fairly well served. There is a great deal of high quality programming available on PBS but also on commercial broadcast and cable television as well. Very little of what is targeted to the preschooler can be classified as low quality. Similarly, though the adolescent market does not have vast quantities of programming available, what is on seems to be a "healthy" mix of entertainment and educational fare. Only about a quarter of the programs (26%) geared to the 6-11 year old were high quality, however.

Parents of school age children are presented with a dilemma. While the 6 to 11 year old audience has a great deal of programming designed for it, much of it is low quality—programs that are not enriching and filled with violence, stereotyping and other problematic content. From the parents' point of view, the bad may be overshadowing the good.

Parents may also get the sense that their 6-11 year olds do not have high quality programs because their 6-11 year olds simply aren't watching them. Although the programs are on, Nielsen data (March, 1996) indicate that they are not the favorite programs. An examination of the ratings for children ages 6-11 indicates that they are much more likely to watch general audience or adult-oriented entertainment programs than they are to watch children's programs. The top rated programs for children in this age group were *Aliens in the Family* (11.4), *Muppets Tonight* (11.2)[8], *Hangin' with Mr. Cooper* (10.5) and *Family Matters* (10.3). The first "children's show", *Goosebumps*, comes in tied for tenth place with *Home Improvement* (both at 7.5).

A number of programs coded as high quality programs made a modest showing in Nielsen's ratings data (that is, they made Nielsen's top 25 rated children's programs). These programs were Fox's *Bobby's World* (3.6) and Nickelodeon's *Doug* (5.0), *The Secret World of Alex Mack* (4.5), *My Brother and Me* (4.1), *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* (4.0) and *Clarissa Explains it All* (3.9). Though most of these ratings fall well below the rating achieved by action/adventure, boy-oriented programs such as *Power Rangers* (6.5), they do make a good showing. One program, *Doug*, even made Nielsen's list of the top ten rated programs for children.

Nevertheless, children gravitate to less-than-educational children's programs or general audience situation comedies. Such preferences were reflected in children's answers to our survey question, "What are your favorite programs these days?" In this case, children (ages ten to 17) were much more likely to include adult-oriented or general audience programs than child-specific shows. In fact, only two of our "high quality" programs made it onto the surveyed children's list of "favorite programs" (*Wishbone* and *Bill Nye the Science Guy*) and neither program made it into the top 50 children's programs based on Nielsen ratings for March, 1996.

Why aren't high quality children's programs being selected by viewers? There are several potential explanations—explanations that go beyond the content analysis and are worthy of more thorough exploration in future research. First, it may be that the high quality (i.e., educational) programs are competing against more entertaining fare. For example, ABC's *Hypernauts* is a creative and engaging "educational" program that airs at 10am on Saturday. It received a 2.1 Nielsen rating for March, 1996. It airs at a good time (the prime late Saturday morning slot) but it has fierce competition from entertainment-only programs: Fox's *Spiderman* (4.8), CBS's *Mask* (3.5), and WB's *Freakazoid* (1.6).

It may also be the case that high quality programs are aired at a time when older children are not likely to be watching TV. The analysis of when quality programs air is illuminating. They tend to air when viewership is low or when preschoolers are most likely to be in the audience (early morning hours on weekends and daytime on weekdays). Low quality programs, on the other hand, tend to air during the “prime” late morning hours on the weekend and the before and after school hours on weekdays. *Beakman’s World*, a “high quality” program that also made parents’ lists of favorite programs, runs on CBS at noon on Saturday. It received a low 1.0 Nielsen rating. Kids ages 6-11 are probably not watching television at this time—they’re more likely to be playing with friends or involved in sports.

These numbers can be interpreted a number of different ways. The pessimist would say that high quality programs don’t make a good showing, that the top rated “quality” program (*Doug*, 5.0) is far behind the number one children’s program (*Goosebumps*, 7.5). The optimist would say that these programs are doing quite well. Because high quality programs tend to have a narrower appeal (because of the age-appropriateness of its educational content), a modest Nielsen rating represents tremendous success. The more moderate interpretation might recognize that while the quality programs that have made it onto the top 25 list have managed to clear some rather high hurdles (to be discussed in the following sections), [9] these programs don’t get the ratings the general audience or pure entertainment programs attract.

In the pages that follow, we will explore the industry perspective on the current state of children’s television: the conventional wisdom about the child audience, beliefs about why it is so difficult to make a successful educational program and strategies for creating a climate where high quality programming for children can flourish.

# THE VIEW FROM WITHIN: INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDREN AND TELEVISION

In one version of an ideal world, children would watch more high quality, enriching programs and fewer entertainment-only or adult-oriented shows. Of course in an ideal world, adults would do the same—forsaking the fluff and the junk for programs designed to improve their knowledge of the world and culture. But the fact of the matter is that neither children nor adults always (or even usually) watch television with such lofty goals. It would be unrealistic, if not unfair, to condemn the pure entertainment value the medium plays in our lives.

It is not the intent of this report to argue that entertainment fare for children has no place on the airwaves. *Rugrats*, *Saved by the Bell*, and *Goosebumps* are all well-done, highly entertaining programs that are very popular with children. In fact, seven out of the ten programs listed in TV Guide's most recent top ten list of children's programs are primarily entertainment-oriented (March 16, 1996).

Instead, this report seeks to explore two trends in children's television. First, the majority of programs for children that air on the commercial airwaves can be considered "low quality" (primarily entertainment-oriented programs that have heavy doses of violence) while a much smaller percentage (29%) could be considered "high quality" (primarily educational programs). Second, and perhaps more important, is the fact that "high quality" programs are not getting the ratings the "low quality" programs are getting. If broadcasters have a mandate to provide informational/educational material to children over the airwaves through the Children's Television Act it is important to figure out both why more high quality programs aren't available to children on the commercial airwaves and also why those that are available aren't as "profitable" for the networks as the lower quality programs. Clearly these concerns go hand in hand. If broadcasters could make more money on the so-called high quality programs (that is, if the programs got large audiences), they would be more likely to air them.

It would be tempting to chastise broadcasters for not doing more for kids, to chastise parents for not exerting more control over their children's viewing, and to lament the fact that America's children are wasting their lives by spending hours a day in front of mindless TV. More productive, however, is to try to determine, from the point of view of those most deeply involved with the industry, the forces which shape and ultimately limit the menu of programs available to children.

To this end, 30-45 minute open-ended interviews were conducted with a snowball sample of 13 industry insiders (cable and network TV vice presidents and presidents, advertisers, promoters, and producers) as well as three children's television advocates (for a total sample of 16) in order to obtain their unique perspective on the challenges and rewards of doing high quality children's television. The inter-

views were conducted between March and May of 1996 by the author of the report. Taken together, these interviews shed light on the roadblocks and opportunities for improving children's television.

### *The Conventional Wisdom (CW) about Children & Television*

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The people who work in children's television have firmly held beliefs about what children do and don't like to watch, who selects programs, and what sorts of programs will attract the type of audience that will satisfy the advertiser. Whether these beliefs stem from proprietary research, convention, tradition, or some other "reality" is unclear. What is clear, though, is that the beliefs are accepted and that the conventional wisdom both shapes and justifies the constraints felt by those who work in the field.

#### **CW #1. Children outgrow "educational programming" by the time they are six.**

A number of network executives argued that while it is fine to educate very young children (preschoolers) with television, it is a mistake to think it will work with school-aged children. The reasoning for this is two-fold: first, older children watch TV for the same reason adults do—to be entertained. Second, children who are in school get enough "lessons" in the six hours they are sitting in the classroom. For these reasons, network executives believe that if they expose the school-age audience too heavily to educational lessons, they will lose them. Anything educational, they say, has to be hidden or camouflaged. As one weblet president said:

"It's not that different from adults. I mean, if you have your choice of watching a half hour documentary on something or Friends...Okay, you come home, especially if you come home from school, and you want to sit down and have a good time. What you don't want to do is sit and be lectured to."

As evidence, respondents pointed to the difficulties PBS faces in attracting an older audience. School-age children see PBS as a "baby" channel, and once they begin to be able to turn on the television and make program choices by themselves, they are more likely to choose commercial fare. Even though PBS has programs for school-age children, for example Magic School Bus and Bill Nye the Science Guy, these high quality programs have struggled in the ratings.

"Public TV starts to lose the kids when they start making their own decisions. At two to five, they're still pretty much relying on parents to turn on the TV and choose the channel. Once they hit 6, they discover the big world of television and make their own choices and it is much harder to grab them and increasingly so as they get older."  
(advocate)

This is reflected in children’s responses in the survey too. Very few of the children listed “educational” programs as their favorite shows. In fact, many of the favorite programs were not, technically speaking, “children’s shows.” The favorites of respondents ages 10-11 were ABC’s Friday Night TGIF (16%); Rugrats (11%), Beavis and Butthead and Singled Out (10%), Saved by the Bell (9%) and Home Improvement (9%). Older children (ages 12-14) favored Friends (17%), Home Improvement (15%) and ABC’s Friday Night TGIF (9%).

**CW #2. The only way to provide educational content to the older child is to skip the academic and focus on the social.**

Many producers and broadcasters believe that while children may be resistant to watching “educational” programs in the strict sense of the word, they will be more willing to watch programs that impart social lessons. In fact, content analyses indicate programs targeted to the 6-11 and over-twelve audiences had far more social lessons (i.e., learning how to live with yourself and get along with others) than cognitive skills (developing approaches to academic learning), knowledge-based (increasing knowledge about facts, ideas, cultures, arts), or physical/health lessons (learning to take care of your body). While preschool programs with lessons also favored social lessons, the types of lessons included were much more broad-based.

**Figure 7 Programs with Lessons**

	2-5	6-11	12+
<b>Cognitive</b>	17% (27)	17% (37)	19% (11)
<b>Knowledge</b>	30% (47)	27% (60)	29% (17)
<b>Social</b>	34% (53)	52% (115)	48% (28)
<b>Physical</b>	19% (29)	4% (10)	3% (2)
	100% (156)	100% (222)	100% (58)

Though many argue that social lessons are the only ones possible, there are clearly others who believe that more traditional educational lessons can be conveyed (about half of all lessons conveyed in the older target audience programs were non-social). What no one would dispute, however, is the notion that educational will not work outside of an entertaining format. As a producer of a well-received educational program stated, “You cannot have a very successful educational show that is not entertaining. Its got to be very strong on entertainment value.”



**CW #3. It is more expensive and more difficult to create educational programs than entertainment programs.**

There are those in the industry who believe that it is more expensive to put together a successful educational program than an entertainment one. There are others, sometimes in the same sector of the industry, who believe this to be a fallacy. One advocate, formerly in public television, said:

“I think if you do it right there’s an incremental cost. ...For example, having educational advisors...doing the research to make sure you’re being effective. Those things do cost money. Not a huge amount, but if we can acknowledge that and give some people a break...”

A producer of high quality children’s programs argued the opposite point:

“Yes, you have to have advisors and yes you have to do reviews — it is much harder work but it doesn’t have to be expensive...If you have a producer of integrity who knows how to spend their money, it absolutely does not have to be more money to produce high quality shows.”

Everyone, from the entertainment-oriented programmer to the educationally-oriented producer, agrees that creating a successful, enriching children’s program is harder than creating one that has only entertainment value.

Said this producer of mainly PBS programs:

“It takes more energy, more effort, and more insight and more integrity. Your standards of excellence have to be a lot higher and your sense of responsibility. You know, if your only mission in life is to sell toys, that’s easy. If your mission is to enrich the human intellect or the human condition, you have a lot more work to do in making a television show.”

Said another president of a weblet that airs primarily entertainment-oriented cartoons:

“When you sit down and try to consciously put out a half hour of information, I think it’s harder to keep a kid captivated by it. I mean, it’s a serious challenge. And I don’t know, other than Sesame Street which is really a preschool property, whether anyone has truly succeeded in doing that.”

**CW #4. It’s better to gear programs to a boy audience than a girl audience or a mixed audience.**

One of the most tenaciously held beliefs about the child audience is that programs need to be male-oriented in order to be successful. The assumptions behind this belief are a) boys are more likely to determine what is viewed in the home (“They control the remote.”), and b) girls will watch boys’ programs but boys will not watch girls’ programs. In an effort to attract the largest possible audience, much of the television that exists today is full of action and adventure (as well as violence) with males as the lead characters. Though in our content analysis we did not look specifically at target gender, this did appear to be the case with the entertainment-oriented programs—especially programs for 6-11 year olds. Programs such as Spiderman, Batman, Superman and X-Men all feature male superheros (with token female characters thrown in here and there). Impressions of programs designed for older ages—the pre-teen/teen market—indicate that boys and girls are equally represented. Programs such as The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo and The Secret Life of Alex Mack—high quality and highly rated programs—feature girls as lead characters.

The respondents who reported the conventional wisdom of gearing programs to boys are unaware of any research in this area, however (except that it is gospel in the industry).

I suppose if there’s any group that’s being underserved right now it might be the girls...I have a lot of theories that girls will watch a boys’ show but boys won’t watch a girls’ show. And so when it comes down to ratings, everybody wants what most kids are going to watch. Whether that’s true or not, I don’t know. I don’t know if anyone’s every really proved it. (children’s television programmer)

...the belief has always been, and the market has always behaved so that boys control the TV sets. Boys will not watch girls’ programming; girls will watch programming where boys are predominant or where male figures are predominant. So there has been a trend in the marketplace to have violent programs to get more and more over the top and that do not consider the needs of girls or the interests of girl viewers. (children’s television producer)

And while they didn’t question it, most were uncomfortable with the conventional wisdom (especially given the fact that the children’s television industry is largely run by women).

You know, it’s a sexist kind of thing. I mean, the point is that girls have a lower social status than boys. So boys feel it’s like embarrassing and a comedown for them to watch a girls’ show whereas for girls it’s like an increase in status that you’re going to watch a boys’ show. You know, they’re not embarrassed by that. (children’s television producer).

## *Children's Television is a Tough Business*

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There is no one in the industry who thinks that the business of children's television is an easy one. Figuring out which television program will succeed in this intensely competitive industry is anyone's game. As one industry executive put it, "It's a !@#\$% crapshoot."

ABC, CBS and NBC no longer dominate the hearts and minds of young viewers. Not one of the "big three" network's children's television programs made the Nielsen top 10 rating list for March, 1996 or even TV Guide's top picks in kids' TV (TV Guide, March 16, 1996).[10] Younger, more aggressive networks such as Fox, WB and UPN have begun to carve out their niche of viewers. Cable channels such as the Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon have made children their livelihood. One network vice president metaphorically described the child audience as having gone from a few giant sky scrapers (where the networks had huge shares of the child audience concentrated on Saturday morning) to hundreds of tiny tepees (with more players reaching smaller segments of the audience across different times and days).

The conventional wisdom described in the previous pages is what helps producers and programmers make decisions about their programs and audiences. As we'll see in the following section, the conventional wisdom is a powerful shaper of the way children's television producers and programmers respond to industry constraints— competition and cross-programming (knowing how to schedule programs), the environment (dictating that the best child audience is the biggest child audience), targeting (creating programs that maximize ratings), and profitability (squeezing out profits in an industry where the margins are fairly narrow).

### **Competition**

Competition for advertisers' dollars in an ever-crowded field leads broadcasters to keep a close eye on the ratings. A partner at an advertising agency explained that the current trend is for advertisers to buy blocks of time in children's programs in advance of the new season. In doing so, they are guaranteed a certain level of ratings by the station (they also get discounted rates). If the programs don't reach expectations, stations have to "make good" by providing free air time elsewhere in their schedule.

Not only must broadcasters keep an eye on their own ratings, they need to be concerned about what is competing on the other stations. They worry about their audience members abandoning them, and in the case of an educational program, they say there is serious cause for concern. One network vice president stated:

"If you put on a program which is narrowly educational in a sort of scholastic sense, which is usually also the sense that a lot of adult observers give you credit for,

then if you are going to be competing with a purely entertainment program, then it seems that overwhelmingly kids will gravitate toward the entertaining programs.”

A real concern of network programmers is maintaining “audience flow”—keeping children tuned to the same station for show after show. A number of programmers lamented the fact that a “dud” in the middle of a children’s lineup can hurt the programs that air before and after it. To avoid this, they say they have to put less appealing but more educational programs at the beginning or at the end of a day-part, where there are fewer audience members or younger audience members. The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Advocates argue that it is impossible for high quality programs to get any audience—that is, to prove their worth—at 6:30 in the morning. But broadcasters are loathe to take a chance on breaking down an audience that has begun to build its ratings. As we saw in the content analysis, the majority of high quality programs aired in the less desirable early morning hours. As one network executive admitted: “it’s true that time slots are very, very decisive and it’s also true there is, of course, a tendency to give a good time slot to a program that looks like it’s going to get a huge audience.”

### **The Environment**

The bottom line, for advertisers and ultimately for broadcasters, is ratings — reaching the target audience. As one media buyer at an advertising agency pointed out:

“What you really care about is ratings performance. Whether this program reaches your target. And this is going to sound very mercenary but basically most advertisers really don’t care about the programs themselves. They care whether the people they reach are watching the program. ... And I would have to say that I don’t think that anybody is opposed to quality programming, but if the quality programming doesn’t get the audience, then it’s not of any value to an advertiser.”

This attitude, combined with the fact that advertisers buy dayparts and not programs (unlike advertisers on adult programs), leads to an environment in which broadcasters seek to eliminate anything that might segment audiences (by age, gender, or interest). Appealing to the lowest common denominator (which, according to the conventional wisdom is what appeals to boys), sets up an impossible hurdle for educationally-oriented programmers (since by definition they have narrow goals and clearly demarcated audiences).

### **Targeting**

It therefore appears that the ideal target audience for advertisers who place their spots in children’s programs is the large 6-11 year old audience. This was evident in the content analysis (which indicated that about two thirds of all children’s programs were geared to school-age children) and also in interviews. This audience watches more television than the adolescent audience and is perceived as a

more legitimate target than the preschool audience. As the above-quoted advertising agency representative pointed out:

“Two to five is not a real big target for advertising. Despite the fact that the advertisers will put commercials on any kind of program, most kids’ advertisers feel a certain amount of social responsibility and they don’t want to exploit that really young group. So most of the programs are aimed at older than that.”

Competition for the largest possible child audience leads producers to create programs that are guaranteed to capture an audience. When the conventional wisdom is that you need boys in your audience, the resulting programming tendency will be to emphasize action and entertainment, use tried and true formulas, minimize risk and quickly cut losses if a program isn’t a success. One advocate stated that the biggest problem he saw with children’s television programming is :

“the follow-the-leader strategy. There is so little room for risk and they’re tied to this lack of ability to take risk, that what you get is when something is successful commercially, everybody jumps in and tries to do the same thing, so you know Power Rangers is a success and you’ve got six clones of Power Rangers.”

The result is a conscious effort to use formulas that have succeeded in drawing large numbers of boy (and, by extension, girl) viewers. The consequence is the limiting of creativity and risk-taking.

Educational programs, moreover, don’t readily lend themselves to audiences that span a large age range. Cognitive lessons, knowledge lessons, even social lessons need to be targeted to a fairly limited group of children in order to be successful. Otherwise, some material will seem too babyish for the older members of the audience while other material will most certainly go over the heads of the younger members of the audience. PBS, which typically airs children’s programs with clear and directed missions (e.g., teaching math to 10-12 year olds) will invariably have lower ratings than entertainment programs with little or no educational content.

“It turns out that if you stick with school, school-type topics in a program, you can usually only hit, like, two years. For example, if you want to teach kids geographic lessons or, you know, reading or writing type things...if your content was geared towards nine year olds, then twelve year olds will say

‘Oh no, this is boring’ but seven year olds will not understand it. You may get a good audience of nine year olds, but in terms of overall numbers, that will not be sufficient to have a broad, broad base. It also disenfranchises most of the kids, which is a real problem.” (network vice president)

## Profitability

One of the biggest challenges of children's television is that it is not, by itself, a tremendous money maker. The margin of profit is narrow, especially compared with the more lucrative adult audience markets. But producers and broadcasters have found that another way to profit from children's television is to create programs that can sell products. In this scenario, broadcasters can get a portion of the money to be made from merchandising the characters on the program, while at the same time benefiting from the free promotional value of the t-shirts, action figures and lunch boxes. The so-called toy-based programming has hurt the efforts of the more educationally-oriented shows. As one licensor/promoter pointed out:

“The tragedy to doing good television for kids is that it often doesn't pay. So people don't do it. A lot of good shows for kids don't sell products, but we shouldn't be developing television to sell products. But people do in order to pay for the television because it's a fairyland world to believe that someone is just going to donate ten million, twenty million, to do nice television shows for kids.”

Later in the interview she says:

“Now what public television has done is that — give me a piece of the [licensing and merchandising] pie. Newt Gingrich has made fun of us in public for being so naive as to not ask for a piece of the pie and get a piece of the pie. So the quasi-extortionary relationship that exists between broadcasters and producers now exists between producers and public television as well. Do you want a good time slot? Do you want it daily? How much of the pie are you going to share?”

Another way that children's television programmers can maximize their profits is to lower the cost of acquiring programs. Many commercial and cable channels have their own production companies (e.g., Nickelodeon) or program libraries (e.g., ABC/Disney, TNT, WB, Fox). This has limited the opportunities of more educationally-oriented producers because it is cheaper for broadcasters to use their in-house material. Furthermore, as advertiser's dollars are stretched more thinly across many different channels, broadcasters aren't willing to spend as much money on any one program. An independent producer related his struggles:

“It's funny...we all thought that when there came to be a lot of different channels...we would be moving into the producers' era. But the opposite has happened in a strange way. ...When there were four or five networks the sums available for quality were focused in on four places. There was quite a bit of money for individual products. But now that they're spread out, the advertisers have also spread their dollars out. We

found that our budgets have gone down dramatically for quality programming and interest in quality programming has declined as well.”

Another producer describes how her budget is tied to the ratings for her high quality show. “What we always hear is, you know, we’re not making money. We’re not making money, so we don’t get the kind of budget that we need for the show.”

## ***The Promise of Children’s Television***

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In the preceding sections we’ve laid out the difficulties that face producers and programmers as well as the conventional wisdom about the child audience that skews programs away from high quality, educational programming and toward action-packed, boy-oriented entertainment programming. But what is clear from both the content analysis and the industry interviews is that there is tremendous potential to offer high quality, enriching programs to children through all sorts of venues.

**It is possible for newcomers to make money in children and television.**

While the profit margin is not as great in children’s television programming as it traditionally has been in adult television programming, relative newcomers to the field are finding that they can focus on the child audience and still stay in business. Commercial broadcasters such as Fox and cable channels such as Nickelodeon dominate the Nielsen ratings for children’s programs. Many credit the success of Fox and Nickelodeon with their niche programming strategies, their audience research efforts, and their experimentation. While some of the programs on these stations could never be considered high quality (for example, Fox’s *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*), a good number of the programs on both of these stations have educational value. In fact, they represent the majority of the programs that made the high quality/high ratings list (see Appendix I). As one advocate pointed out:

“One of the interesting things about Fox (and some of their successes have obviously been less well-received than others), [is that] Fox has always been a network to take chances. And they’ve done it with some good things too. It’s just the whole structure of Fox which allows them to try things—some things work and some things don’t. The shows that I think get lost, like *Bobby’s World*, which is a lovely pre-school show...sort of get lost in the shuffle with some of the more high profile shows. But the fact is that [they] get in there and try different things to see what works.”

**There is more choice for children and parents than ever before.**

The recognition of a profitable “child market” has led to an explosion of offerings on commercial and cable television. Even though roughly two-thirds of the programs examined in this content analysis

were primarily entertainment-oriented (with little or no educational value), more than one third were classified as “high quality.” A fair number of these high quality programs get decent ratings as well. Six out of the 25 top-rated programs for children ages 2-11 were high quality programs. Granted, high quality programs do not dominate the airwaves. Nor are they frequently selected by child audiences. But discerning parents and children can find high quality programs. They simply need to subscribe to cable or set the alarm clock for 6:30am.!

**It is possible to produce entertaining and educational shows that get decent ratings.**

While it may be harder (and somewhat more expensive) to produce a program that is enriching as well as entertaining, it is also possible to reap the rewards. Industry experts could easily identify programs that successfully entertained and educated (See Appendix 1). They listed the more visible PBS programs (Sesame Street was often identified as the epitome of this type of program, but Wishbone, Ghostwriter, Reading Rainbow and Bill Nye the Science Guy were also frequently mentioned). Many cable programs were also mentioned—particularly programs on Nickelodeon (Doug, The Secret Life of Alex Mack, Gullah Gullah Island) and the Disney Channel (Danger Bay, Welcome to Pooh Corner). But commercial broadcast examples abound as well. CBS’s Beakman’s World is a highly regarded program, as is Fox’s Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego? These programs do not get the ratings that Goosebumps, Power Rangers or The Simpsons get, but given their more narrow target audience and their difficult time slot, their ratings are quite impressive.

**There is a lot of talent and creativity in the business.**

Children’s television is not just cartoons anymore. In fact, almost half of all children’s programs are not animated shows (45%). New formats are being tried—live action dramas and comedies, game shows, talk shows, documentaries, magazine formats—and are finding audiences. Big names are getting into the business and giving it newfound prestige—Steven Spielberg (Animaniacs), Shelley Duvall (Shelly Duvall’s Bedtime Stories), Linda Ellerbee (Nick News ). Celebrities are making appearances as characters in children’s programs (a frequent technique used in Sesame Street) and characters in children’s programs are becoming celebrities in their own right (Bill Nye (the Science Guy); Larissa Oleynick (Alex Mack), Fred Rogers (Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood)).

**Some advertisers will support quality programming.**

While it is true, as one media buyer said, that advertisers care primarily about the ratings programs get, there is also precedent for corporate support of programs that have less than stellar ratings. For more than a decade McDonald’s and Kelloggs have supported ABC’s Afterschool Specials. And as one advocate pointed out, “They did support the programs even though they probably weren’t the best buys for the dollar. That’s a nice illustration of what can happen with a good program. It’s not like they



don't have advertisers." There is also a trend to "bookend" preschool programs with advertisements rather than place the ads within the show. The Cartoon Network recently began airing Big Bag with McDonalds and Fisher-Price advertisements airing only at the beginning and end of the program. Nickelodeon does the same with its preschool block, Nick Jr.

Corporations also support programs to promote their overall image. Corporate underwriting of public broadcasting programs such as Barney and Friends (Huggies) is common. Advertisers on adult programs have long recognized the value in attaching a brand name with a positive program. As one network executive pointed out:

"The Cosby Show made Bill Cosby and NBC millions and millions of dollars. And one of the reasons was that not only was it so highly rated, it was also perceived as having such an incredibly positive image that sponsors were booming with support."

It's not unthinkable that the same phenomenon could occur with children's television programming.

# WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN FOR HIGH QUALITY CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS TO SUCCEED IN THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT?

In the end, there appear to be both difficult challenges and also tremendous rewards to creating quality children's television programming. Given the challenges, what criteria need to be in place for high quality children's programming to take root and thrive? Specifically, what can be done to increase the availability and viewership of high quality children's television programs? The suggestions that follow stem from the hard experiences of failed attempts and the satisfying lessons of successful programs as put forth by those most familiar with children's television programming — producers, programmers, advertisers and advocates. Some may seem obvious, but for those less familiar with the inner workings of the industry, they may also be illuminating. So, beyond creating excellent programs that children will want to watch, what can be done to encourage the presence and viewership of high quality programs?

## *Location, Location, Location (and some cooperation)*

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In television, timing may be everything. Scheduling a program at 6:00am on a Monday or 12:30pm on a Saturday is a surefire way to guarantee low ratings. Very few children are watching any TV at these hours. Scheduling a science program for children ages 9-12 against another science program for children ages 9-12 will certainly yield similar results. Place a program between two established hits during the late morning weekend slot — now that's a fighting chance.

Of course, no one broadcaster is going to take a chance on putting an uncertain program in a plum spot if the rest of the channels are airing shows that would most certainly draw the audience. Perhaps broadcasters could (in this one small area) collude, or at least cooperate, by either “levelling the playing field” (e.g., setting aside a specific time to air educational programs) or “slicing up the pie” (e.g., where broadcasters define their target audience to be complementary instead of competitive). NBC has illustrated that this can be done and it seems to have been a successful programming decision. (Their Saturday morning lineup is exclusively aimed at pre-teens and teens.) In this industry, competition can drive out quality. It may be most economically advantageous (at least in terms of programming for children) to try cooperative counter-programming.

## *Promotion*

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Popular programs can be promoted everywhere and anywhere—cereal boxes, on-air advertisements, fast food restaurants, even macaroni and cheese. Large budgets and tremendous efforts are made

to promote entertainment programs. Fox made a mighty effort to promote its retooled Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. Disney also uses a well-oiled promotional machine to ensure audiences for its animated films. The same could be done with educational programs.

## *Licensing and Marketing*

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Other efforts to make audiences familiar with educational programs could be made through the licensing and marketing of products based on educational program characters and content. It has worked for years for Sesame Street. It has worked for Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. It could work for other educational programs. The synergy that is created in the promotion/licensing/marketing arenas could certainly boost children's and parents' awareness of programs. The result of such efforts, beyond increasing viewership, would be an increased inflow of money that could be turned into higher quality production and continued promotion.

## *Outreach*

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Efforts to create awareness for a program in the larger cultural environment should move beyond the stores and the airwaves. High quality children's programs need to be identified as worthy of parents' and children's attention. The parents we spoke to struggled to identify quality programs for their children—particularly programs for those of school-age. While the programs may be there, they may be difficult to find (because they are on at an inconvenient time) or they may be difficult to identify. One locally syndicated program that was coded as a high quality program in the content analysis is called "Gladiators 2000"—a program that combined a game show format (participants needed to answer difficult knowledge-based questions) with sports (they competed athletically as well). Without ever watching the show, parents would be unlikely to identify it as an educational program.

Such identification would certainly be easier if programs could be promoted as appropriate for particular ages and focused on a set of curriculum goals (or learning objectives). Outreach can happen in a number of ways. Advocacy groups, Home and School Associations, even the local TV critic can spotlight high quality children's programs and list them in a place where parents and children can get easy access (TV Guide, local TV listings, parents' magazines). The president of PBS also recently suggested that programs receive a "positive" rating, so that parents who use the Vchip could bring in the quality programs as well as screen out the violent ones. Producers can also work within the educational system, providing videotapes, workbooks and lesson plans as supplemental resources to be used at home or in the classroom.

## ***Commitment***

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Quality children's programming would be more likely to succeed if broadcasters and cable companies made a long-term (26 show) commitment to programs. Such a commitment would allow the program to build an audience (which may take longer than building an audience for a pure entertainment program but which may, in the end, bring more dedicated viewers). One industry insider gave the example of *Cheers*, which did miserably the first year but, because the network was committed to giving it a chance, went on to become one of the most successful programs of all time. Commitment also gives merchandisers the cue that the program will be around for a while, making them more likely to sign on to the program as well its products.

Commitment ought to go beyond those airing the program; it must also be found in the people who support it financially—the advertisers and corporate underwriters. Advertisers need to see the value in being connected with a program that embodies what we want for our children. Recognition for their commitment could come in the form of awards, higher profile “sponsorship” roles, or other “pats on the back.”

## ***Training & Dialogue***

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Train those making the programs and those making decisions about the programs in ways to effectively include “the good stuff” and avoid reliance on “the bad stuff.” While there are many excellent writers and producers involved in children's television, there are also a lot of misconceptions about the child audience and how to effectively “educate” while also entertaining. Workshops for members of the writer's guild, conferences with key decision makers, and on-going dialogue with policy makers, television producers and industry executives are steps in the right direction.

## ***Regulation***

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Regulation is often the choice of last resort, but in the case of children's television, regulation, or at least the threat of it, has produced results. The current version of the Children's Television Act does little more than ask broadcasters to try harder to serve their child audiences. There is no minimum time standard, nor is there an adequate definition of what would qualify as programming that serves the informational/educational needs of children. But before broadcasters figured out that the Act had no real teeth, they scrambled to find material that would help them meet the CTA's mandate. A number of producers interviewed indicated that meant increased interest in quality programming. This gave them the opportunity to pitch their shows and obtain a foothold in the commercial market.

# CONCLUSIONS

The research reported in “The State of Children’s Television: An Examination of Quantity, Quality and Industry Beliefs” has brought us closer to understanding how much children’s television programming is available, how much of what is available is high quality, enriching programming, and where and when the high quality programs can be found. It also points to the difficulties broadcasters face in creating and distributing economically viable educational programs.

Some highlights & recommendations:

✧ **There is a good deal of high quality programming generally available.** Unfortunately, many of the high quality programs are aired on basic or premium cable television. Since approximately 1/3 of children ages 2-11 do not have access to cable television (A.C. Nielsen), millions of parents and children have to rely on broadcast television for their educational programming needs.

✧ **The preschool audience is fairly well-served.** Content analyses indicate that commercial broadcasters, public broadcasters and cable channels all do a nice job offering programs that contain social and academic lessons in a high quality format. The results of our national survey indicate that parents are, for the most part, pleased with what is available to their preschool child.

✧ **Six to eleven year olds get the lion’s share of programs, but these are more likely to be low quality programs.** A large number of the commercially broadcast programs for children in this target age have little educational value—they are violent, stereotypical and lacking in diversity and production value. Our survey indicates that parents are not pleased with what is available for their older children. Content analyses indicate that their concerns may be justified.

✧ **Industry experts argue that advertisers want the largest possible audience, and programmers and producers believe the way to obtain it is to program for entertainment more so than education and for 6-11 year old boys.** Ratings data would seem to support their contention. The highest rated programs are those that feature male superheroes and are action and adventure-oriented (e.g., Power Rangers, Spiderman, Batman & Robin).

✧ **Broadcasters’ beliefs about what attracts the largest audience may create a self- fulfilling prophecy.** High quality programs for the desirable 6-11 year old audience are typically buried in the schedule (very early in the morning or weekend afternoons). Boy-oriented, violence-laden programs dominate the more favorable parts of the schedule to such a degree that it is unusual to find programs that are girl-oriented or even gender-neutral.

☺ **Programmers believe that educationally-oriented programming is less economically viable (that is, difficult for them to reach a large audience at a low per capita cost).** They argue that:

- Good educational programming, by definition, requires a smaller target age. (As a result, a science program will necessarily have a narrower appeal than a superhero cartoon.)
- Educational programs are more expensive than entertainment programs.
- Purchasing new educational programs or shifting to a different production source may be costly for programmers who have existing libraries of children's shows or are connected (through contract or ownership) with entertainment-oriented production houses.
- Programs that hold interest for limited segments of the audiences will disrupt the “flow” of the schedule and threaten to hurt the ratings of programs that air before and after the less popular educationally-oriented program.

☺ **Including high quality, educationally-oriented programs in the menu for children will require the cooperation of the many people who are involved in children's television:**

- Advertisers should recognize that who is in the audience matters as much as how many are in the audience. The child audience, like the adult audience, consists of individuals with varied interests, developmental levels, and viewing preferences.
- Broadcasters should see the “image” benefit that can follow from high quality programs for children. Our survey found that both parents and children listed channels nearly as often as they listed specific shows when asked, “Can you think of a good program for children.”
- Parents need to be informed about the quality programs that are available for their children in order to more effectively guide their children's choices.
- Children should be encouraged to become active viewers—deliberate in their program selections and critical of the material they see on television.

There appears to be consensus on what constitutes quality programs for children. Parents, industry insiders, researchers (and even, to some extent, children) agree that a high quality program should be enriching, entertaining and well done while avoiding violence, sex, stereotyping and “bad” language. And though parents, researchers, and even some industry insiders place a high priority on the provision of high quality programs, it is the child audience that ultimately determines what airs. Nielsen ratings indicate that not only do children prefer low quality, entertainment-only programs, their favorite programs aren't even children's shows—they are adult programs! But children don't always make the “healthiest” choices. Imagine, for example, if it was left to the child to determine what he or she would

be eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner (I'm imagining Happy Meals, Twinkies and chocolate shakes). We don't let them make such choices because we know their choices wouldn't be the best ones. Responsible parents offer children a variety of foods (including, but not limited to, "junk food"), encourage them to eat healthy foods and teach them the benefits of consuming a balanced diet. Eventually, we hope, children develop a taste for the good foods so that they can grow up to healthy and active adults. We can do the same with television by working with broadcasters and advertisers so that they offer (and support) such programs (and air them at a time and place when children will watch), providing parents with the information they need (by letting them know which programs might be healthy choices for their children) and teaching children to be as critical and "health" conscious in the programs they choose as they are in the foods they consume.

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# Appendix 1

High Quality Shows in Sample(1)	Station	Industry List(2)	Parents' List(3)	Kids' List (4)	Nielsen 25(5)
AJ's Time Travel	UPN				
Alice in Wonderland	Disney	x			
Allegra's Window	Nickelodeon				
Arcade	Nickelodeon				
Babysitter's Club	Disney	x			
Bananas in Pajamas	UPN		x		
Barney and Friends	PBS	x	x		
Beakman's World	CBS	x			
Big Comfy Couch	PBS				
Bill Nye the Science Guy	Fox/PBS	x	x	x	
Bobby's World	Fox	x			x
Busy World of Richard Scarry	Showtime				
Carmen SanDiego (game)	PBS	x	x		
Carmen SanDiego(cartoon)	Fox	x	x		
Charlie Brown and Snoopy	Disney				
Clarissa Explains it All	Nickelodeon		x		x
Danger Bay	Disney	x			
Doug	Nickelodeon				x
Eureka's Castle	Nickelodeon				
F.R.O.G.	Prism				
Faerie Tale Theatre	Disney				
Family Double Dare	Nickelodeon				
Fox Cubhouse	Fox				
Fraggle Rock	Disney				
Free Willy	ABC				
Fudge	ABC				
Ghostwriter	PBS	x			
Gladiators 2000	WB-17				
Gullah Gullah Island	Nickelodeon	x	x		
Hang Time	NBC				
Hey Dude	Nickelodeon				
Hypernauts	ABC				
Katie and Orbie	PBS				
Kids Inc.	Disney				
Kidsongs	PBS	x			
Kilroy	Disney				
Lambchop's Playalong	PBS		x		
Lassie	Nickelodeon				
Legends of Hidden Temple	Nickelodeon				
Little Bear	Nickelodeon				
Magic School Bus	PBS	x	x		
Mister Rogers Neighborhood	PBS	x	x		
Mother Goose	Disney				
Mr. Wizard	Nickelodeon				
Music Box	Disney				
My Brother and Me	Nickelodeon				x
Mystery Files of Shelby Wu	Nickelodeon				x
National Geo: Animals	CBS				
Neverending Story	HBO				

# Appendix 1

High Quality Shows in Sample(1)	Station	Industry List(2)	Parents' List(3)	Kids' List(4)	Nielsen 25(5)
News For Kids	NBC				
Newton's Apple	PBS				
Nick News	Nickelodeon	x			
Not Just News	Fox	x			
Opening Shot	Bravo				
Owl TV	Showtime				
Reading Rainbow	PBS	x	x		
Reality Check	WB-17				
Secret World of Alex Mack	Nickelodeon	x			x
Sesame Street	PBS	x	x		
Shelly Duvall's Stories	Showtime	x			
Shining Time Station	PBS		x		
Story Porch	BET				
Teen Summit	BET				
The Puzzle Place	PBS	x			
The Secret Life of Toys	Disney				
Timon and Pumbaa	CBS				
Under the Umbrella Tree	Disney	x			
Weekend Special	ABC	x			
Welcome to Pooh Corner	Disney	x			
What a Mess	ABC				
What Would You Do?	Nickelodeon				
Wild About Animals	CBS				
Wild and Crazy Kids	Nickelodeon				
Winnie the Pooh	ABC/Disney		x		
Wishbone	PBS		x	x	
Other Nominated Programs					
America's Funniest Videos	ABC/Snyd		x		
Captain Planet	Syndicated	x			
Dudley the Dragon	PBS	x			
Power Rangers	Fox			x	
Rugrats	Nickelodeon	x	x	x	
Rupert the Bear	Nickelodeon	x			
Saved by the Bell	NBC		x	x	
The Tick	Fox	x			

(1) The titles listed here are programs that received high ratings on the "objective" quality index and the "subjective" quality measure in the content analysis of programs sampled in April, 1996. They do not represent a census of all programs available for children. They are listed for comparison purposes, not as recommendations. This list contains neither local high quality programs nor unsampled programs.

(2) These are programs listed by one or more industry "insiders" who were asked, in interviews, to identify programs that would illustrate their notion of a "good" program for children.

(3) These are programs identified by parents who were asked, in a telephone survey, "Could you give some examples of good programs for

# Appendix 1

(4) These are programs identified by children who were asked, in a telephone survey, "What are favorite television programs these

(5) These are programs whose Nielsen ratings for March, 1996 ranked in the top 25 programs for ages 2-11.

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