

ANNENBERG PUBLIC POLICY CENTER
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Measuring the Child Audience

Issues and Implications for Educational Programming

By Josephine Holz, Ph.D.

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[About the Annenberg Public Policy Center](#)

The 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 that 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 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.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the results of a research project sponsored by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, that focuses on the commercial measurement of television's child audience and the possible effects of this measurement system on the amount of educational programming available to children. To provide context for this analysis, the study also examined parents' and children's behavior and attitudes toward educational and entertainment television programs.

METHOD

The study included three research components:

1. A roundtable discussion with representatives from the children's television industry.
2. A nationwide telephone survey with parents and children.
3. A series of focus group discussions with children in third through sixth grade.

KEY FINDINGS

- Though many in the children's television industry have concerns about the accuracy and reliability of Nielsen television ratings for children, there is no indication that the audiences for educational shows are disproportionately undercounted. Participants in the roundtable discussion, with the exception of producers of educational programs, felt no need to abandon or even supplement the current ratings system as a way to set advertising rates and make programming decisions.
- Parents of six- to twelve-year-olds are largely unfamiliar with the commercial broadcasters' educational offerings and do not seek out such programs for their children. Nevertheless, there is evidence that advertiser support of educational shows is rewarded by some parents through their purchases. A significant proportion of parents said they would be more likely to buy a company's product if it is advertised on an educational program. Many also said they had, in the past year, purchased a children's product that is related to an educational program.
- New Federal Communications Commission (FCC) reporting and programming requirements have made little difference in most parents' awareness of the broadcasters' educational programs for their children. In fact, most parents do not even know that broadcasters are required to air a minimum amount of educational programming. Even fewer are familiar with the "E/I" symbol stations have been using on the air and in *TV Guide* to identify their educational programs. Children, as well, are unaware of the commercial broadcasters' educational programs and the codes used to identify them. They are, however, quite savvy about the network ratings for programs (i.e., TV-Y, TV-PG, etc.).

- Broadcasters' conventional wisdom that children will not watch a program if they think it is good for them is not supported by this research. The eight- to twelve-year-old respondents in our survey are neutral or positive in their attitudes toward educational shows. Only a few children (less than ten percent) acknowledged that knowing a show was educational would make them less interested in viewing. In fact, focus group discussions gave the impression that children *like* entertainment programs that teach them new things, especially when the lessons have a perceived direct relevance to their own lives.

The current system used for measuring the child audience (the Nielsen ratings) works against educational programs that, by definition, have narrower and possibly smaller audiences. A more qualitative measurement – one that taps children's learning from and parents' positive feelings about educational programming – could provide additional data for programmers and advertisers. However, before such a system can be developed and implemented, more work is needed. Parents and children must become more familiar with educational offerings through greater outreach and promotion. In addition, programmers and advertisers must be convinced that there is value in supporting programs that reach fewer children but have a potentially greater educational impact. They must be convinced that positive feeling about such educationally rich programs will translate into positive feelings about the networks and the advertisers' products.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two years, the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania has directed a number of activities addressing widely-held concerns about the quality of television programming available to children, particularly school-age children, and increasing the amount and viewership of high-quality educational programming for this age-group. The research discussed in this report represents some of APPC's most recent efforts in this area and builds upon the information and insights produced by the prior projects.

The focus of this report is on the commercial measurement of television's child audience -- the Nielsen ratings -- and the possible impact of this measurement system on the amount of educational programming available to children. Producers of educational programs are concerned that the ratings system may be undercounting the number of children actually reached by their programs, further handicapping their ability to have their programs bought and distributed.

Nielsen ratings are obtained through a combination of viewing diaries filled out by adult household heads, TV set meters, which automatically record whether the TV is on or off and the channel to which the set is tuned, and "peplemeters," mini-computers attached to the TV sets in Nielsen households, which require viewers to push specific buttons whenever they enter or leave the viewing area.

INDUSTRY CONCERNS OVER THE CURRENT RATINGS SYSTEM

A number of concerns have been raised about how well this system actually measures children's television viewing. First, there are questions about how reliable children are as the "button pushers" of peplemeters. Preschoolers may not understand or be able to carry out this task, while older children may become bored and uncooperative. Second, there are concerns about how accurately out-of-home viewing is measured, and these concerns have intensified as more and more children have entered day care centers, preschools, and private child-care arrangements. Third, with parents spending less time with their children during the day, it has become more difficult for the household diary keeper to keep track of his or her children's daytime television viewing.

Other concerns have centered on Nielsen's method of reporting children's ratings by grouping children into standard and rather broad age categories -- 2 to 5 and 6 to 11. This practice is seen by some as inappropriate and counterproductive for educational programs, which necessarily target narrower age groups and overlap with these standard age categories. For example, an educational show may be designed for 4-7 year-olds and consequently be undercut by either of Nielsen's standard age categories. Such a show would also have no way of determining its actual reach among its target viewers, short of commissioning costly custom analyses from the Nielsen company.

An additional concern producers of children's educational programs have is the use of Nielsen ratings as the primary measure of a program's success. Aside from issues of accuracy and reliability, the ratings measure only the number of children supposedly

present in the audience. They provide no information about the nature of children's viewing experiences – their degree of attention and involvement with the programming, their recall, comprehension, or learning from the programming, or even whether they actually watched it or were simply present in the room and busy doing other things.

With the FCC requirement that commercial broadcast television stations carry a minimum of three hours of educational programming for children each week, ratings for the educational shows these stations broadcast will come under intense scrutiny. Many commercial broadcasters believe that marketplace standards doom such shows to fail, because they are convinced that school-aged children prefer to watch entertainment programming. Indeed, educational shows for children in the primary school years have rarely enjoyed the kind of ratings achieved by some educational shows for preschoolers. This has raised the following questions:

- Are ratings an accurate and reliable measure of the actual size of the school-age audiences for educational shows, or are viewers of educational programming being systematically undercounted?
- If the ratings are an accurate reflection of viewership, why do educational television shows usually attract smaller audiences than entertainment shows?
- How do children make viewing decisions? Who and what influences their decisions?
- How aware are children of the educational shows available to them?
- What do children want from television programs? What do they like and dislike?
- What do parents want television shows to do for their children, and how does this influence their children's viewing? How does it affect their own attitudes toward children's programs and the companies that advertise on them?
- What can be done to make educational programming more competitive in the commercial television marketplace?

RESEARCH DESIGN

To address these concerns, this project included three research components:

A roundtable with producers, advertisers, programmers, academics, and Nielsen representatives, to discuss what information they need and want about the children's audience, their concerns about how children's viewing is currently measured, and their suggestions for changes and improvements to this system.

A nationwide telephone survey with parents and children, to examine children's television viewing patterns and parents' and children's attitudes toward educational programs.

A series of focus group discussions with children in third through sixth grade, to hear in greater detail how children talk about their television viewing and the role that

television plays in their lives, and to elicit more in-depth information about their attitudes toward educational programs.

ORGANIZATION OF REPORT

The remainder of this report is divided into four major sections. The first three represent the perspectives of three key constituencies concerned about children's television viewing: the children's television industry, parents, and children themselves. The final section synthesizes the findings from all the study's components and offers conclusions and recommendations.

THE INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

On the Fall of 1997, the Annenberg Public Policy Center hosted a roundtable meeting in New York City with producers, advertisers, programmers, and academics involved with children's television, as well as representatives from Nielsen Media Research and Statistical Research, Inc., a research firm funded by the major broadcast networks and other organizations to conduct research on alternative methods for measuring television audiences, through an umbrella project called S.M.A.R.T. (Systems for Measuring and Reporting Television). The purpose of the meeting was to ascertain participants' needs and uses for information about the children's audience and to solicit their views and opinions about how best to measure that audience.

HOW DO WE DEFINE "WATCHING" TV?

Roundtable participants raised the issue of how "watching" television is defined, noting that children often play and do other things while they are in a room with the TV set on. Different viewing frequencies will be obtained depending on the definition or criterion for "watching TV." This is of special concern for children, because they are often exposed to TV programming not selected by them but by the adults or older children in the family.

The roundtable was informed that Nielsen panel members are instructed to "punch in" whenever they are "watching or listening to" the television, and to "punch out" whenever they stop watching or listening. It is up to each individual to decide whether or not he or she is watching or listening. Thus, if an individual leaves the room where the TV set is located but is still listening to the television from nearby, he or she might not "punch out."

There was some discussion among the roundtable participants about whether a more objective measure of "watching TV," such as simply entering or leaving the room where the TV set is on, would be preferable to this more subjective definition. However, the group concluded that simply being present in the room was too broad a definition and would include too many individuals who were, in fact, *not* actually paying attention to the TV.

HOW MANY ADULTS REALLY WATCH CHILDREN'S SHOWS, AND HOW MANY CHILDREN WATCH ADULT SHOWS?

One issue that generated extensive and heated discussion had to do with the surprisingly high ratings consistently recorded for children's shows among adults in households with no children. One roundtable member pointed out that advertising rates for children's shows are determined in part by a measure called the VPVH, the relative proportion of child "viewers per viewing households" tuned to the show, and that the more adults counted in the audience for these shows, the lower the children's VPVH (and therefore the lower the ad revenue). Several participants voiced concern that some proportion of these adult ratings could be inaccurately "masking" children's ratings. In other words, adults might not be "punching out" when they stopped

watching TV as a children's program came on, and the children in the household might not be "punching in." The fact that adult ratings are particularly high for children's programs that come on right after an adult program ends seems to lend some credence to this suspicion.

However, other roundtable participants responded that there was no way of knowing how much "masking" was occurring and that they had no reason to suspect that these numbers were inaccurate. They noted that it might not be socially acceptable for adults to admit that they watched children's shows, which would make it difficult to confirm or disconfirm these patterns through viewer surveys, for example.

The group also discussed the relatively high numbers of child viewers in the audience for adult shows such as *Seinfeld* and *E.R.*, according to the ratings for these shows. Roundtable participants questioned these figures as well, noting that there was no way to know how many of these children were actually watching these adult shows and how many just happened to be in the room while their parents watched the shows. Several participants said that these numbers, which did not make sense to them, led them generally to distrust Nielsen's ratings for children.

WHAT ABOUT OUT-OF-HOME VIEWING?

A study of children's changing lifestyles conducted by SRI for the S.M.A.R.T. initiative in 1995 showed a substantial number of children being cared for outside their own homes for portions of each day. There was widespread concern expressed by the roundtable participants that the present ratings system is not adequately measuring children's television viewing in these out-of-home locations.

Two issues raised by roundtable participants had to do with the difficulties of measuring children's television viewing in places outside their own homes. On the one hand, participants were concerned that when children visited Nielsen households as guests, their television viewing might not be accurately recorded. It was suggested that child visitors might account for some of the adult ratings for children's shows in households with no children. Though all visitors to Nielsen peplemeter households, including any children, are expected to "punch in" on peplemeter buttons predesignated for guests, roundtable participants wondered to what extent visiting children are able or willing to do this.

Secondly, roundtable participants were concerned about the absence of television ratings for child viewers in institutional settings such as day care centers, preschools, and schools, which are not included in Nielsen's sample. This is of particular concern to PBS, since a number of PBS' children's programs are used as part of the curriculum in many schools. Though PBS does not sell advertising, it does use ratings data to help attract underwriting for their shows. Additionally, it would like more information about how its programs are actually used in schools, in order to develop better curriculum materials and strategies around these programs.

The Nielsen company has been testing a "portable" out-of-home diary system that could address some of these concerns. Under this system, if a child spends a substantial portion of the day in an out-of-home location where television is viewed, the responsible adult at the site would be asked to fill out the child's TV-viewing diary for that time period. The child's out-of-home viewing would also be recorded in the

household diary filled out by the child's parent, and the two diaries would then be compared for consistency.

Group members questioned whether teachers at day care centers, preschools, or schools would accurately record children's television viewing in their facilities. For one thing, they were concerned that the staff might be too busy and distracted to handle this additional responsibility. Secondly, they wondered if there would be a perceived stigma associated with using television in these settings that would bias teachers toward underreporting its actual use.

SHOULD WE MEASURE VIEWER ATTENTION AND INVOLVEMENT?

Roundtable members were asked how interested they might be in a more comprehensive measure of television viewing that included information about the nature and quality of children's viewing experience – such as the degree of attention and emotional involvement they experienced and their comprehension and recall of program content – as another way of assessing programs' popularity and potential impact. The advertising agency representatives in the group indicated that they and their clients would welcome this information, since they assumed that these factors would affect the impact of their ads.

However, the network and producer representatives at the roundtable noted that, while they, too, were interested in this information, they already collect it on a customized, proprietary basis, and they did not think this kind of information lent itself to being collected through a central, syndicated study. Collecting these data on a proprietary basis gives their companies a competitive advantage, if the research is conducted well. In addition, they expressed concern that a single centralized study could not adequately meet all their specific information needs.

WHAT DOES THE INDUSTRY WANT?

Many of the roundtable members' concerns and information needs have been noted above, such as PBS programmers' and producers' interest in collecting viewing data in schools where their television programs are shown. Other roundtable participants made the following suggestions:

- Step up attempts to develop a truly passive measurement device that would work as well for children (even infants) as for adult viewers.
- Replicate the academic research on children's attention levels and activities while viewing television that was conducted almost twenty years ago by Dan Anderson and his colleagues.
- Conduct more research on how children watch their favorite programs, compared to other shows they may not feel so strongly about: How, if at all, does their viewing experience differ when watching their favorite shows, and how does this affect the impact of the shows and accompanying commercials?

THE PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE

METHOD

To collect more information about children's television viewing habits, the Annenberg Public Policy Center commissioned Chilton Research Services, Inc. of Radnor, Pennsylvania, to conduct telephone interviews with parents of six- to twelve-year-old children. Because the FCC's three-hour rule only applies to commercial broadcast stations, the survey's questions about educational television programs focused primarily on programs carried by commercial broadcasters rather than public television or cable services.

A sub-sample of these parents' children, ages eight to twelve, were also interviewed. The children's responses are discussed in the next section of this report.

Interviews were conducted between November 1 and November 15, 1997. Using random digit dialing as the sample selection method, interviews were completed with a nationwide sample of 1,014 parents. The parents' interviews lasted an average of sixteen minutes. The margin of error for the sample of parents is $\pm 3.3\%$. The sample has been weighted to the national census, using race, education level, and geographic region as parameters.

WHEN AND WHERE DO CHILDREN WATCH TELEVISION?

According to the parents, their children ages six to twelve watch television for an average of 2.6 hours per day, with Saturdays as the heaviest viewing day, followed by Sundays and then weekdays.

TABLE 1: AMOUNT OF TIME CHILD WATCHES TV DURING THE WEEK , ACCORDING TO PARENTS

DAY OF WEEK	MEAN HOURS PER DAY
Typical weekday	2.40
Saturday	3.44
Sunday	2.79
Overall mean	2.60

Parents report that boys watch TV for more hours per week than girls do. Children of parents with lower incomes, lower educational levels, and non-whites also watch significantly more hours of television, as do children who have their own TV sets in their bedrooms.

Most parents indicated that they have at least two working television sets in their homes, and many said they had three or more. More than one out of three (39%) said

their children have their own TV sets in their bedrooms, but most children who have a TV in their room (77%) do not actually do most of their viewing there, according to their parents' reports. Boys, African-Americans, and children of parents with lower education levels are more likely to have their own TV's.

Sixty percent of parents reported that their children sometimes watch TV outside the home, for an average estimated viewing time of 1.9 hours a week.

HOW DO CHILDREN DECIDE WHAT TO WATCH?

According to these parents, when their children sit down to watch television, most usually have either a specific show in mind that they know is on at that time (46%) or a specific channel that they usually turn to first (35%). A minority of children (17%) reportedly flip through the channels until they find something they like.

Of the various sources of influence on their children's television viewing choices, parents credited *themselves* with wielding the most influence over what their children watch. However, parents of children who had TV's in their bedrooms reported having less influence over their children's viewing. After the influence of parents, promotional announcements for upcoming shows were seen as the next most powerful influence on children's viewing choices, followed by children's siblings and, lastly, their friends.

TABLE 2: INFLUENCES ON CHILD'S TV VIEWING, ACCORDING TO PARENTS

SOURCE OF INFLUENCE	PERCENT HAVING 'A LOT OF INFLUENCE' ACCORDING TO PARENTS
Parents themselves	72.2
Advertising for shows	27.4
Other children in family	20.0
Child's friends	6.3

WHAT ARE CHILDREN'S FAVORITE SHOWS?

Parents named over one hundred and fifty different TV programs as their children's favorite. The most frequently mentioned favorites for children ages six through twelve are listed below.

TABLE 3: CHILD'S FAVORITE PROGRAM, ACCORDING TO PARENTS
(FOUR RESPONSES ALLOWED)

<i>PROGRAM</i>	<i>% FAVORITE</i>
Rugrats	20
Doug	8
Home Improvement	6
Saved by the Bell	5
Sabrina	5
Family Matters	5
The Simpsons	5
Scooby Doo	5
Power Rangers	4
Arthur	4
Magic School Bus	4
Nickelodeon Network	4
Wishbone	4

As this list illustrates, most shows named by parents as their children's favorites are shows intended specifically for child audiences (62%), but 20% are not child-oriented (the remainder consisted of non-responses or answers that could not be coded). Almost half the shows cited (47%) were categorized as "high quality" children's shows by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, whose criteria for "high quality" include being educational and generally enriching for children.

WHAT DO PARENTS WANT FROM CHILDREN'S TV?

The attributes that were most important to parents in the television shows their children watched were that they be in good taste, teach values and moral lessons, be the kind of show the whole family can enjoy watching, and teach social skills. Teaching academic skills was ranked lower, though a majority of parents still considered it "very important." Parents were largely unconcerned about the presence of advertising in the shows their six-to-twelve year-old children watch.

TABLE 4: WHAT PARENTS WANT FROM CHILDREN'S TV

<i>ATTRIBUTE</i>	<i>% CONSIDERING IT "VERY IMPORTANT"</i>
Be in good taste	88.4
Teach values and moral lessons	75.1
Whole family can enjoy watching	74.9
Teach social skills	72.2
Stimulate imagination	66.0
Be educational	63.6
Teach academic skills	59.6
Be entertaining	59.6
Carry no advertising	28.6

All the learning-related attributes – teaching values and moral lessons, teaching social skills, being educational, and teaching academic skills – were significantly more likely to be rated as “very important” by parents who were non-white, had less formal education, or had lower income levels – groups who also reported higher amounts of television viewing by their children.

WHAT DO PARENTS THINK OF CHILDREN’S TV?

Parents were not enthusiastic about the television programming available for their six to twelve year-old children. Nearly three out of ten rated most of the available programs as “pretty bad,” while about six out of ten rated most of them “just OK.” Only about one out of ten thought most of the available programming was “very good.” Parents of the oldest children in the study (11-12 year-olds) were the most critical of the television fare available to their children.

TABLE 5: PARENTS’ OPINION OF CHILDREN’S TV

OPINION OF CHILDREN’S TV	PERCENT OF PARENTS
Pretty Bad	27.6
Just OK	61.6
Very Good	10.8

HOW AWARE ARE PARENTS ABOUT THE FCC’S THREE-HOUR RULE?

Despite the publicity surrounding the FCC’s adoption of the requirement that commercial broadcast stations carry at least three hours of educational programming for children each week, most parents (61%) were unaware of this requirement. Even among the minority who claimed to have been aware of the rule, hardly any (3%) could accurately cite three hours as the minimum amount of educational programming stations are required to carry weekly. In fact, three times as many parents (9%) thought the minimum requirement was ten or more hours per week, while 15% thought there was no minimum requirement. Just over half the parents who said they had been aware of the rule (54%) admitted that they did not know what the minimum requirement was.

Most parents (69%) had never noticed the E/I symbol for educational/informational programming at the start of any children’s shows. Of those who said they *had* noticed this symbol, a small majority (57%) indicated that they have made use of these symbols to guide their children’s television viewing.

HOW AWARE ARE PARENTS ABOUT EDUCATIONAL SHOWS?

Most parents (70%) reported that they usually do *not* try to find out which children’s shows on the commercial broadcast networks are considered educational. Lower-income parents were the only group that was significantly more likely to do so. The

majority of those who said they do seek out this information generally found it “very easy” (24%) or “somewhat easy” (40%) to get, but more than one-third (36%) found it “somewhat difficult” or “very difficult” to obtain this information.

When asked to name an educational show for children six to twelve on one of the commercial broadcast networks (“that is, ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, UPN, and the WB network”), many parents had difficulty coming up with an example. Though some educational shows that air on commercial broadcast stations were correctly cited by a few (*Bill Nye the Science Guy*, *Beakman’s World*), others named shows broadcast on PBS, some of which target preschoolers (*Sesame Street*, *Barney*, *The Magic Schoolbus*, *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?*), sitcoms (*Family Matters*, *Home Improvement*), or children’s shows on cable television (*Blue’s Clues*, a show for preschoolers on Nickelodeon).

TABLE 6: EDUCATIONAL CHILDREN’S PROGRAMS ON COMMERCIAL BROADCAST TV, AS NAMED BY PARENTS

PROGRAM	PERCENT MENTIONING
Bill Nye, The Science Guy**	8
Sesame Street*	5
Barney*	4
Magic Schoolbus*	3
National Geographic	3
Family Matters	2
Beakman’s World	2
Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?***	2
Home Improvement	2
Blue’s Clues*	2

* not on commercial broadcast television

** airs on PBS and is also in syndication and airs on many commercial stations

When given the names of educational shows and entertainment-oriented shows for school-aged children currently broadcast on the commercial networks, most parents had heard of those educational shows that had been on for some time (such as *Saved by the Bell* and *Bobby’s World*), but newer educational shows such as *The New Ghostwriter Mysteries* and *Brand Spanking New Doug* had much lower awareness levels among parents.

TABLE 7: PARENTS' AWARENESS OF CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS ON COMMERCIAL BROADCAST TV

PROGRAM	PERCENT WHO HAVE HEARD OF PROGRAM
Saved by the Bell	88.5
Goosebumps	84.1
Bobby's World	71.7
X-Men	71.4
Animaniacs	70.2
Bill Nye, The Science Guy	57.0
Sweet Valley High	48.9
Beakman's World	47.3
The New Ghostwriter Mysteries	41.8
Sports Illustrated for Kids	35.3
NBA Inside Stuff	31.4
Fudge	28.0
Brand Spanking New Doug	25.8
Science Court	13.9

For those shows they had heard of, parents were asked to categorize each show as either "intended to be educational" or "just intended to be entertaining." Parents were most likely to place shows teaching academic subjects such as science in the "educational" category, especially if the word "science" appeared in the show's title (*Bill Nye the Science Guy*, *Science Court*). They were less likely to consider shows that teach social skills and lessons (e.g., *Saved by the Bell*, *Brand Spanking New Doug*, *Fudge*) as "educational."

TABLE 8: PROGRAMS CONSIDERED EDUCATIONAL BY PARENTS

PROGRAM	PERCENT CONSIDERING PROGRAM EDUCATIONAL (OF THOSE AWARE OF PROGRAM)
Bill Nye, The Science Guy	97.1
Science Court	85.4
Beakman's World	70.9
Sports Illustrated for Kids	57.8
NBA Inside Stuff	49.4
The New Ghostwriter Mysteries	46.3
Brand Spanking New Doug	37.1
Saved by the Bell	33.1
Bobby's World	32.6
Fudge	24.1
Sweet Valley High	22.4
Goosebumps	11.3
Animaniacs	6.3
X-Men	4.5

WHAT DO PARENTS THINK OF SPONSORS OF EDUCATIONAL SHOWS?

About one out of five parents (21%) said that they would be more likely to buy products from a company that advertised on an educational children's show than one that advertised on an entertainment-oriented children's show. Almost all the rest (75% of the total sample) said this would make no difference to them. Consistent with their greater concern about the educational benefits of the shows their children watch, non-white parents and those with lower incomes and lower education levels were more likely to report that they would have a preference for buying products from companies that advertised on educational shows.

DO PARENTS BUY LICENSED PRODUCTS FROM EDUCATIONAL SHOWS?

Most parents (63%) said that their children's requests for product tie-ins were not related to whether a show was educational or entertainment-oriented. Among the remainder, more reported that their children asked for licensed products from entertainment-oriented shows (23%) than from educational shows (13%).

As for actual purchases, a little over one-third of the parents (36%) said they had bought a licensed product based on an educational TV show within the past year. Parents of younger children were significantly more likely to report having done so.

However, the show most often cited as the source of these products was *Goosebumps* (a show on the FOX network), which does not claim to be educational. *Goosebumps* is based on a popular children's book series, and it is likely that the products these parents were referring to were *Goosebumps* books, which they may have considered "educational" because they required reading. In fact, almost one-quarter of the products mentioned by parents as tie-ins to educational shows were connected to shows not categorized as educational by the Annenberg Public Policy Center.

THE CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE

METHOD

Two research methods were used to elicit information about their television viewing habits and preferences from children themselves. First, Chilton Research Services conducted telephone interviews with a randomly selected sample of 319 children ages eight to twelve drawn from the same households in which the parents had been interviewed. Interviews were conducted between November 1 and November 15, 1997, and lasted an average of eleven minutes each. The margin of error for the children's sample is $\pm 5.5\%$.¹

Secondly, eight focus group discussions were held from November 17 to November 20, 1997, with a total of sixty-six children in grades three through six.² In each group, children were shown excerpts from two television series, one educational and one entertainment-oriented, to start the discussion. In the first two groups held, the educational program segment used was an excerpt from *Beakman's World* (shown on CBS). However, in all subsequent groups *Bill Nye the Science Guy* was substituted for *Beakman's World*, because the children in the first two groups felt that *Beakman's World* was for younger children. The entertainment-oriented show used in all the groups was *Space Cases* (shown on Nickelodeon). After giving their reactions to these excerpts, the children then took part in a discussion about their TV viewing habits, preferences, and the role that television generally plays in their lives, as well as their suggestions for improving TV programming for children their age.³

HOW IMPORTANT IS TELEVISION IN CHILDREN'S LIVES?

At the start of each focus group, before the discussion turned explicitly to television viewing, each child was asked to name his or her favorite activities. Children offered a large range of responses, including participation in sports of all kinds, collecting things, playing musical instruments, listening to music, playing with friends, playing with pets, going to school, playing video games, and using the computer. Watching television was rarely mentioned first, and some children didn't mention it at all at this point.

When asked how they would rank TV in importance to them, compared to the other activities they enjoy, most of the children ranked it as of medium priority. Only a few in each group said it was very important, while only one or two ranked it low in importance.

¹ When questioning the children about the same issues covered in the parents' survey, the same question wording was used whenever possible. However, in some cases the questions had to be adapted to make them more understandable and easier for the children to answer, allowing for only indirect comparisons between the children's and parents' responses.

² Four groups were conducted in Teaneck, New Jersey, and four in White Plains, New York. The children were selected to represent a range of income levels, and at least one child in each group was African-American, Hispanic, or from another minority group. In forming the focus groups, children were divided into two grade categories -- 3rd and 4th, and 5th and 6th -- and then into separate groups of boys and girls.

³ Dr. Renee Cherow-O'Leary, President of Education for the 21st Century and National Coordinator of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences' Creating Critical Viewers Program, planned, moderated, and analyzed the groups.

WHEN DO CHILDREN WATCH TV?

In the telephone survey, instead of being asked for estimates of the *amount* of time they spend viewing television during different parts of the week, as the parents had been asked, children were asked *how often* they typically watch television during different parts of the day on weekdays, and how often they watch on Saturdays and Sundays. Consistent with the parents' reports, children indicated that they were most likely to watch TV on Saturdays – over half the children said they “almost always” watch TV then. Considerably fewer children said they “almost always” watched TV on Sundays. However, the children in the focus groups noted that Sunday evenings were the only time they usually watch TV with the entire family, and several mentioned that their families regularly watch the new *Wonderful World of Disney* show on ABC Sunday evenings, a show that ABC programs specifically for this purpose.

On weekdays, children were about equally likely to watch TV in the afternoon or in the evening. Children were least likely to watch TV regularly on weekday mornings.

TABLE 9: WHEN CHILD REPORTS WATCHING TV

<i>TIME PERIOD</i>	<i>PERCENT OF CHILDREN 'ALMOST ALWAYS' VIEWING DURING TIME PERIOD</i>
Weekday mornings	19.8
Weekday afternoons	37.6
Weekday evenings	37.3
Saturday	52.7
Sunday	32.6

WHERE DO CHILDREN WATCH TV?

In the survey, the percentage of children that reported having a TV set in their bedroom (39%) exactly matched the percentage reported by parents. However, consistent with parents' reports, most of the children who had their own TV sets (72%) said they do *not* usually watch TV in their bedrooms.

In the focus groups, all the children said they had at least two TV sets at home, and several even reported having six or seven sets. Almost all of the children who participated in the focus group discussions had their own TV sets in their rooms. However, they said they often watch TV together with their siblings and also, though more rarely, with their parents. Children tend to watch TV in their own rooms when there are family differences over what to watch, and on Saturday mornings when they don't want to wake their parents. Several also mentioned that they would watch TV in their rooms when they wanted to watch something that they knew their parents would not approve of.

Nearly four out of ten children in the survey (39%) said they watch TV outside the home at least “a few times a week.” In the focus groups, many of the children reported occasionally watching TV in school. School viewing and its potential effects are discussed further below.

HOW DO CHILDREN DECIDE WHAT TO WATCH?

Consistent with the high levels of co-viewing with family members reported by the survey respondents, most children in the survey indicated that they do not usually get to choose what they watch on TV, though children who have TV sets in their own rooms are more likely to do so. Nearly two-thirds of the survey respondents (64%) said they get to make their own viewing choices only “once in a while” or “hardly ever,” while a little over one-third (36%) reported “almost always” being able to choose for themselves.

When they do get a chance to make their own viewing selections, most children said they usually either turn to a specific *channel* that they like to watch (39%) or to a specific *show* that they know is on at that time (30%). Another 30% said they usually turn on the TV and start flipping through the channels, a considerably higher percentage than the number of parents (17%) who cited this method as their children’s typical practice.

In the focus groups, children described their viewing habits as similarly directed. Several noted that they often turn to *TV Guide* or other printed listings or to the preview channel on their cable systems to find out what is on TV. Others acknowledged that they sometimes do channel-surf but that they usually scan only a limited number of channels, the ones that they like the best. Favorite channels mentioned were Nickelodeon, HBO, the WB network, and MTV.

Consistent with the influence parents in the survey reported having over their children’s viewing, most children in the focus groups said their parents did have rules that limited the amount or the kinds of shows they could watch:

My mom lets me watch one show a day (Girl, 4th grade)

Two to three hours a day is OK but not five or six hours – they don’t want TV messing up my brain. (Boy, 6th grade)

I have to read for as many hours as I watch TV, so I don’t watch so much any more. (Boy, 5th grade)

Other children, usually in the older groups, indicated that their parents gave them more leeway in making their own viewing decisions.

My parents think if I’m watching something and enjoying it that I must be able to handle it. (Boy, 6th grade)

My parents tell me that I will have to suffer the consequences of making bad choices about what I watch. (Girl, 4th grade)

My parents are pretty picky about what I watch, but they know I wouldn’t pick anything really bad so they leave me alone. (Girl, 5th grade)

*My mom tells me to watch TV in my own room so she can watch her shows.
(Girl, 5th grade)*

However, even those children who reported having parental rules about what they could watch gave the overall impression that these rules were not vigilantly enforced. Many said that they could always go watch TV in their own rooms when they wanted to watch something they thought their parents would not approve of, and that their parents rarely looked in to see what they were watching in their bedrooms.

Children in the focus groups said that peer pressure or wanting to watch the same TV programs as their friends did not play a large role in their TV viewing decisions. They admitted that it was fun to be able to talk about TV shows with their friends and that they sometimes felt left out if they had missed a show that other children were talking about. But they said that watching the same programs was not an important factor in their friendships or social interactions.

We call each other on the phone during commercials to see what we're watching. (Girl, 5th grade)

It's not real important, but it's nice to be included. (Girl, 4th grade)

WHAT DO CHILDREN THINK OF CHILDREN'S TELEVISION?

Overall, children expressed moderate approval of the television programming available to their age group: about two-thirds of the children surveyed rated TV programming for young people their age as “just OK,” while slightly more than one-quarter rated it “very good.” Less than one out of ten (8%) rated it “pretty bad.” Older children had more negative opinions about the available programming than younger children did.

In the focus group discussions, children initially found it difficult to evaluate children's television, because they were uncertain as to which programs were meant for children their age. Nevertheless, most of them rated TV programs for kids their age as “just OK.”

Focus group respondents named a large number of different shows as their favorites – from children's shows such as *Rugrats*, *Kenan and Kel*, *Sabrina*, and *California Dreams*, to situation comedies such as *Family Matters*, *Home Improvement*, and *Full House*, to more adult-oriented programs such as *X-Files*, *the Simpsons*, and *Friends*. In explaining why these shows had become their favorites, children mentioned a variety of characteristics the shows had, such as humor, action, fantasy, sports, being like “real life,” adventure, good music, and their favorite stars. When it came to humor, children said they particularly enjoyed seeing “*people messing up in a funny way*” (Boy, 4th grade). They also liked shows that exemplified real life problems and solutions: “*I like shows that are about problems we are going to have*” (Girl, 5th grade).

Children said they disliked shows that are:

- **In bad taste and inappropriate** – “TV is OK, but sometimes it gets out of hand and gets fresh and inappropriate, like MTV and ‘Beavis and Butthead.’” (Girl, 3rd grade)
- **Violent** – *Power Rangers* was frequently mentioned as a show that had a bad effect

on younger siblings.

- **Unrealistic** – “A lot of shows start out with real problems, but when they solve them, they get dumb.” (Boy, 5th grade)
- **Repetitive** – “Too many reruns and repeats.” (Boy, 4th grade)
- **“Disgusting”** – “Weird,” “gross,” “sex,” or “bad language.” (Girls, 3rd and 4th grades)
- **Meant to be funny but fall short** – ‘Beakman’ (Beakman’s World) tries too hard to make me laugh. Mostly, it’s silly and dumb.” (Girl, 5th grade)
- **Poorly scheduled** – “‘Nick at Nite’ comes on too early!” (Boy, 3rd grade)

HOW AWARE ARE CHILDREN ABOUT EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS?

While parents had been asked to give examples of “educational” children’s shows on the commercial broadcast networks, children were simply asked if they could name a TV show “for kids your age that teaches you things.” More than one-third of the children (35%) could *not* name a show that fit this category. Among those who could think of such a show, over sixty-five different programs were cited. The most frequently mentioned shows are listed below.

TABLE 10: EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS, AS NAMED BY CHILDREN

PROGRAM	PERCENT NAMING PROGRAM
Bill Nye, The Science Guy	18
Magic Schoolbus	8
Kratts’ Creatures	4
Wishbone	4
Beakman’s World	3
Saved by the Bell	3
Family Matters	3
Full House	3
Doug	3
National Geographic	3
Reading Rainbow	3
Rugrats	3
Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?	3
Bobby’s World	3

As some of the parents had done, a number of children mentioned sitcoms like *Family Matters* and *Full House* as shows that taught them things. In the focus groups, several children described what they learned from such shows:

There are morals to stories, like in “Seventh Heaven,” to help you see how situations are solved. (Girl, 6th grade)

“Buffy” (the Vampire Slayer) teaches what to do when you’re in trouble. (Girl, 5th grade)

The children were then asked about their awareness, viewing, and categorization of the same fourteen shows included in the parents' survey. As was the case with the parents, children were more aware of those shows that had been on the air longer. Several of the longer-running educational shows, such as *Saved by the Bell*, *Bobby's World*, and *Bill Nye the Science Guy*, had high awareness levels and had been seen by large numbers of children.

TABLE 11: CHILD'S AWARENESS AND REPORTED VIEWING OF CHILDREN'S SHOWS

PROGRAM	% AWARE OF PROGRAM	% HAVE SEEN PROGRAM (OF THOSE AWARE OF PROGRAM)
Goosebumps	96.9	84.1
Saved by the Bell	94.7	89.7
Animaniacs	92.2	90.5
Bobby's World	88.4	91.1
X-Men	88.4	61.9
Bill Nye, The Science Guy	84.6	90.4
Sweet Valley High	54.4	58.4
Brand Spanking New Doug	46.2	82.3
Beakman's World	42.6	75.0
Sports Illustrated for Kids	41.7	48.1
The New Ghostwriter Mysteries	40.8	70.0
Fudge	40.4	84.5
NBA Inside Stuff	34.8	56.8
Science Court	13.2	73.8

When asked if each of these was "a show that teaches kids things or not," children's responses were again largely consistent with parents' answers. Science shows were most clearly judged as educational by children, with *Bill Nye the Science Guy* most likely to be placed in this category. The *Sports Illustrated for Kids* TV show was also judged by a large percentage of child respondents to be "a show that teaches kids things." In the focus groups, a number of children cited sports shows of all kinds as educational, because these shows taught them how various games were played and how to keep score. Like their parents, children were somewhat less certain about the educational nature of shows that dealt with social skills and lessons, such as *Brand Spanking New Doug*, *Bobby's World*, and *Saved by the Bell*.

TABLE 12: PROGRAMS CONSIDERED EDUCATIONAL BY CHILDREN AND PARENTS

PROGRAM	% OF CHILDREN SAYING PROGRAM TEACHES (OF THOSE AWARE OF PROGRAM)	% OF PARENTS CONSIDERING PROGRAM EDUCATIONAL (OF THOSE AWARE OF PROGRAM)
Bill Nye, The Science Guy	97.0	97.1
Beakman's World	83.1	70.9
Science Court	81.0	85.4
Sports Illustrated for Kids	80.5	57.8
NBA Inside Stuff	65.8	49.4
The New Ghostwriter Mysteries	61.5	46.3

Brand Spanking New Doug	51.0	37.1
Bobby's World	50.0	32.6
Fudge	45.7	24.1
Saved by the Bell	44.7	33.1
Sweet Valley High	40.5	22.4
Animaniacs	17.0	6.3
Goosebumps	11.7	11.3
X-Men	8.2	4.5

WHAT DO CHILDREN THINK OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS?

Survey respondents were largely neutral or positive in their attitudes toward educational shows. A little over half the children (52%) said that knowing that a show is educational had no impact on their interest in seeing it, while about four out of ten children (41%) said that this made them *more* interested in watching. Only a few children (6%) acknowledged that this would make them *less* interested in viewing the show. Non-white children expressed significantly more interest in watching shows considered educational.

In the focus groups, however, children expressed more ambivalent feelings about educational programming. Some were adamant that they did not like to watch educational shows, especially after spending a day learning things at school.

I don't like to watch stuff you learn from. (Boy, 4th grade)

I like sitcoms after school, not shows with learning. (Girl, 4th grade)

Kids have enough educational stuff in schools. (Boy, 5th grade)

Educational shows are for little kids. (Girl, 3rd grade)

However, during the more detailed discussions that took place in the focus groups after children watched samples of educational and entertainment programs, it became apparent that it was not the educational content or intent that children objected to as much as the form in which it was delivered. Programming that is too didactic turns kids off, but children do enjoy programming that presents educational content in a funny or dramatically compelling way.

I hate this show but I like one thing about it – it teaches true facts. (Girl, 4th grade)

I kind of like it because they answer questions. (Girl, 5th grade)

It could be funny but you're still learning something. (Boy, 5th grade)

It would be OK if they added cartoons. (Girl, 3rd grade)

It gets boring if they talk too much. (Boy, 4th grade)

For children in this age group, it is also important that shows present educational content that is new and at least somewhat challenging. Children in the focus groups who were critical of the educational programming they were shown in the groups complained that these program segments presented material they had already learned

in school, and said they would really enjoy shows that taught them new things they didn't already know.

Why don't they find out what we're learning in school, so the programs would match what we know? (Boy, 6th grade)

WHAT DO CHILDREN THINK OF TELEVISION SHOWS SEEN AT SCHOOL?

Though they welcome television viewing as a break from other school work, children in the focus groups were not enthusiastic about what they were shown at school.

We watch news on Channel One. It's boring. (Boy, 5th grade)

They make you watch "Wishbone." (Girl, 4th grade)

The children agreed that watching TV in school was not as much fun as watching at home, largely because in the classroom they were a captive audience and the programming was part of the curriculum they were expected to master.

You really have to pay attention, because then you'll have to fill out worksheets when it's over. (Boy, 4th grade)

Most of the focus group participants who watched the excerpt from *Bill Nye the Science Guy* said they had watched *Bill Nye* episodes at school, and this experience seemed to have had a negative impact on their attitudes toward the show.

It's not as much fun when you're forced to watch. (Boy, 4th grade)

DO CHILDREN PAY ATTENTION TO RATINGS AND CODES?

Children seem to be very aware of the age-appropriate ratings on the broadcast networks' programs, and some say they use them when making viewing decisions. In the survey, more than seven out of ten children (72%) said they knew that TV shows carried these ratings, and more than half of these children (57%) agreed that the ratings help them decide which shows to watch. Older children were more aware of these ratings, but younger ones were more likely to use them in making viewing choices.

In the focus groups, children often mentioned these ratings spontaneously, in the course of discussion, before the moderator raised the subject.

If it's PG13, I call my mom to watch with me. (Girl, 3rd grade)

The participants seemed to have a reasonable understanding of what various ratings meant, though there was some confusion between the television and theatrical film ratings systems, as the quote above illustrates.

In fact, it became apparent in the groups that although children are quite aware of the differences among broadcast television, basic cable, pay cable, pay-per-view, and so on, they think of all of it as "television." Movies that are seen on television, even those that are rented on videocassettes, are also considered "television."

Awareness and understanding of the E/I code for educational shows was much lower. Though a little more than half the children in the survey (56%) claimed to have seen “information or something at the beginning of a kids’ TV show that tells you that the show is educational,” only one or two children in the focus groups were familiar with the E/I symbol and knew what it meant.

HOW WOULD KIDS IMPROVE CHILDREN’S TELEVISION?

In the focus groups, when children were asked how they would improve television programming for kids their age, they responded with the following themes (with examples taken from all the groups):

- **Make shows funnier** – Children love humor and comedy, but they spurn material that tries to be funny and fails. “Get rid of old, corny, dumb jokes.” “Don’t be so stupid.” “Don’t try to be too funny.” “Observe the world and see what’s new. Then turn this into jokes.”
- **Make shows less offensive** – Though children often enjoy programming that adults would find in bad taste, younger children are made uncomfortable by material they find unsuitable for themselves. “Take out grossness.” “Take violence and bad language out of shows.” “Get rid of sexual things.” “Take out Power Rangers.”
- **Make shows more realistic** – Older kids in particular want programming that reflects reality and lends insight into how they should behave and how to handle different situations. “Shows should show real people doing real things.” “Don’t make characters seem too perfect.” “Make the good guys lose sometimes, like in reality.” “Have shows that show how to do things.”
- **Make shows that are both entertaining and educational** – Children want programming that is engaging and entertaining but that also helps them learn new things. “More facts and educational things that we want to know.” “Add fun, excitement, scariness, and a little bit of learning.” “Make shows basically entertaining but also where you can get something educational out of it.”
- **Keep shows from getting stale** – Children want the shows that they like to evolve by including new characters, letting old characters grow and change, and producing more new episodes. “Invent some new characters for ‘Rugrats.’” “‘Nick’ needs new ideas.” “Have fewer reruns.”
- **Schedule shows more conveniently for kids** – Children are often frustrated because the realities of homework and bedtime get in the way of their seeing shows they would like to watch. “Start good movies earlier in the evening so I can see the ending.” “Have less continuations of shows.” “Repeat the show on a different day.”

SUMMARY

In the Introduction to this report, a series of questions were raised about the Nielsen ratings for educational and entertainment programs. This section of the report organizes the study's findings to address those questions.

ARE THE NIELSEN RATINGS AN ACCURATE AND RELIABLE MEASURE OF THE AUDIENCE FOR EDUCATIONAL SHOWS?

Though many in the children's television industry have concerns about the accuracy and reliability of Nielsen television ratings for children, there is no indication that the audiences for educational shows are disproportionately undercounted, compared to those for children's entertainment shows. However, the standard age categories used by Nielsen in reporting children's ratings do penalize educational shows, since such shows have to target narrower age groups than most entertainment programs. Unfortunately, at this point there seems to be little industry support for a push toward the use of different or narrower standard age categories in Nielsen ratings reports, because advertisers are generally content with the current system's categories, and because it would cost more for Nielsen to increase its sample size enough to provide reliable ratings for smaller age groups.

On another level, Nielsen ratings provide no information about the nature of the child's viewing experience – his or her level of attention, involvement, or enjoyment. It is possible that high-quality educational shows could do as well or better than some entertainment shows on these measures, and there may be advertiser support for more systematic research of this kind.

DO CHILDREN REALLY PREFER ENTERTAINMENT ORIENTED SHOWS OVER EDUCATIONAL SHOWS, AND IF SO, WHY?

Like a lot of adults these days, many school-age children lead very busy lives, and television must compete with a host of other activities for their time and attention. Children do like to watch TV, however, and they are a sophisticated and discerning audience. Television producers and programmers may be underestimating children's tastes, interests, and abilities, when it comes to both educational *and* entertainment programming.

Parents, siblings, and, to a lesser extent, friends all influence children's viewing habits and choices. But in multiple-TV households where children often have television sets in their own rooms, children have considerable freedom to watch what they want, with little parental oversight. Children's viewing choices are also influenced by advertising and promotion for television shows.

Most children do not react negatively to the concept of educational programming, since they are eager to learn new things. For those who say they dislike such shows, it may be that they have seen too many programs that were overly didactic, that tried to convey material they had already mastered, or that tried but didn't succeed at being

funny and clever. Children also seem to have a negative opinion about television shows they have been “forced to watch” in school.

While children are familiar with and enjoy many educational shows aimed at their age group, they also think of adult sitcoms and dramas as shows that teach them valuable lessons, which is one reason they watch and like these shows. Most children express only a lukewarm evaluation of children’s shows in general, making adult programs even more attractive to them.

Asking children questions about television is somewhat problematic, because children have a very inclusive concept of “television.” For them, movies shown on television, whether on broadcast or cable channels or even on videocassettes, are also “television.” Asking about *children’s* television, aside from shows for preschoolers, is also problematic, because children aren’t sure which programs fall into this category. And asking children about “educational” television, or television that teaches them things, raises similar issues. For example, even though many children are interested in learning social skills from television programs, they are not sure if programs that convey these lessons should be categorized as shows that “teach.”

In the children’s focus groups, it became apparent that children don’t draw clear distinctions between broadcast and cable television, television and movies, children’s and adults’ television, **or** educational and entertainment television. They apply many of the same standards to each, which means that they expect children’s programs to be as interesting and compelling as adults’ programs, and educational programs to be as interesting and compelling as entertainment programs.

WHAT DO PARENTS WANT TELEVISION SHOWS TO DO FOR THEIR CHILDREN? HOW DOES THIS INFLUENCE THEIR CHILDREN’S VIEWING AND THEIR OWN ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR TOWARDS CHILDREN’S PROGRAMS AND ADVERTISERS?

Parents of school-age children want the shows their children watch to be in good taste and to teach their children values, moral lessons, and social skills. They also want shows they can watch together as a family. They are somewhat less interested in having shows teach their children academic skills and subjects, though most still consider this very important. For lower income parents, who have less access to good schools and other educational resources and whose children spend more time watching television, the educational benefits of television, whether academic or social, are especially important.

However, the television industry is not meeting parents’ expectations when it comes to the programming available to their children. Relatively few parents gave this programming high marks.

Parents say they have a lot of influence over what their children watch on television, and that they watch TV with their children some or most of the time. However, many children have their own TV sets, which mitigates against parents’ influence in this area. Most parents say they *do* make use of the age-appropriate ratings on TV shows to guide their children’s viewing.

Though parents are concerned about their children’s viewing habits and would like the

programs their children watch to be educational, they are generally not very knowledgeable about the educational shows now available on the commercial networks, and most do not attempt to find out which children's shows are educational. Most parents were unaware of the FCC's station licensing guidelines requiring commercial broadcasters seeking expedited license renewal to air at least three hours of educational programming for children each week. And very few **have** noticed or made use of the E/I symbol for educational shows on children's programs.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO MAKE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING MORE COMPETITIVE IN THE COMMERCIAL TELEVISION MARKETPLACE?

Educational shows have different and more ambitious goals than even the best entertainment shows for children – they must be *both* entertaining *and* educational. Neither of these goals is easy to achieve by itself, but doing both simultaneously presents an even greater challenge.

The fact that educational shows have to target a narrower age-range than entertainment shows inevitably limits the size of the potential audience for them. If such shows present material too advanced for their viewers, the audience won't understand or appreciate the content. On the other hand, if the educational content is already familiar to viewers, they may find it uninteresting. This was illustrated in the focus groups conducted for this project, when some children criticized the educational programming they were shown because it presented information they had already learned.

Nevertheless, the fact is that educational shows *are* expected to draw respectably large audiences by commercial broadcasters. What can be done to help these shows attract more viewers?

One factor that can make a difference is the amount of advertising and promotion these shows receive from networks and stations, to inform viewers about their availability and schedules. Parents indicated that promotional announcements have more weight than siblings or friends as influences on their children's viewing choices, and children in the focus groups confirmed that they notice and are influenced by promos. If educational shows were promoted as heavily as some entertainment shows, they would have a greater likelihood of attracting more viewers.

Parental influence is another element that could be used to help educational shows draw larger audiences. Though parents are concerned about their children's television viewing and try to guide it in various ways, they are relatively unaware of most of the newer educational programs available for their children on the commercial networks or the fact that these shows carry an on-screen label identifying them as educational. More information and publicity efforts about educational shows could be directed at parents, many of whom have not yet been reached with this information. Parental awareness of the E/I symbol and what it means is an area in which there is considerable room for improvement.

If advertisers believe that helping to sponsor educational shows will lead to increased sales for their advertised products, that would lead more advertisers to buy time on such shows and strengthen the shows' marketplace standings. Though most parents said that this would make no difference to them, a substantial minority – one out of

five – indicated that they would be more likely to buy the products of a company that advertised on an educational show. It is likely that this figure is inflated to some degree by a social desirability bias, but it does suggest that educational shows may have additional benefits for advertisers, even if they reach smaller audiences. Further research in this area could benefit educational programs by alerting advertisers to some of these benefits.

CONCLUSIONS

This study's findings lead to the conclusion that concerns about the Nielsen ratings for children's educational television programs are, to a large extent, expressions of a broader issue – how educational programming is affected by a commercial television system driven by marketplace forces and concerns. The fact that the success of educational programs is measured by the sheer size of the audiences they attract, and the manner in which these audience numbers are measured and reported, are in turn determined by the needs and constraints of this commercial system. In other words, the Nielsen ratings system is not so much a cause of the difficulties encountered by educational programming as another consequence of the larger commercial environment within which television programming is created and distributed. Though problems with the audience measurement system should continue to be studied and addressed, it is unlikely that these efforts will lead to any fundamental changes until the more basic issues having to do with the surrounding social, cultural, economic, and political systems are also addressed.

Nevertheless, the findings presented in this report can provide children's television producers and programmers with some insights that may help to increase viewership for educational programming. Children want programs that teach them important and interesting lessons in entertaining and compelling ways, especially when the lessons presented have a direct relevance to their own lives and concerns. They dislike programs that underestimate their intelligence and knowledge, or that present information in an overly didactic form. With good promotion, marketing, and scheduling, educational programs that are genuinely entertaining have an opportunity to be seen by even more of the children they are designed to reach.