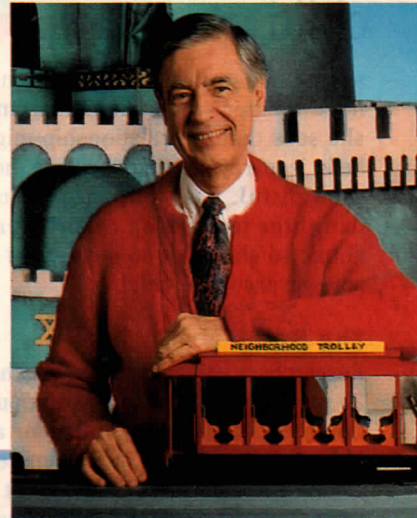


Mr. Rogers, Barney, Pepper Ann, More

What Kids' TV Can Teach You



By Bette-Jane Raphael

As far as I can tell, the only women who've never used television as a baby sitter are those who've never had babies. If my own circle of friends and acquaintances is any barometer, the rest of us regularly leave our children in front of the TV set at harried moments—and feel as guilty about it as if we'd left them in front of an oncoming car.

I know it was with a definite sense of sheepishness that I used television as a baby sitter for my son. This was something I did from the time he was an infant, 17 years ago, when turning on the set often seemed like the only way to free up five minutes for a shower.

I introduced him to solid food and *Sesame Street* at about the same time, and welcomed Mister Rogers into my home as cordially as I did my husband. The day that our cable company offered us Nickelodeon, I was as happy as if they'd offered to pay our mortgage.

But employing a Sony as a mother's helper, especially when much of its children's fare struck me as less than terrific, engendered a lot of guilt. Deep down I feared that, program by program, I was lowering my son's IQ point by point.

Imagine my relief, then, when my now 5-year-old daughter started watching TV, and I found I no longer needed to feel the same shame I had with her brother. In fact, just the opposite. I realized I could feel pretty good about the majority of shows she was watching. This is because shows like *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* have a lot of company now, due to new Federal guidelines mandating more educational television, and to a

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new generation of children's programmers who know a lot about kids and want to produce something more for them than *Itchy and Scratchy* cartoons.

Now there are people like John Arnold, Ph.D., a professor of education with a background in child and adolescent development. An education consultant for Disney/ABC Cable Networks, Dr. Arnold passionately believes in television's potential to be a positive influence in children's lives.

“Television is a great medium for telling stories,” he says, “and you can teach a huge amount through stories.

“Kids want to know about everything,” he points out. “They want to know why is the sky blue and why are some people mean and some people nice. They want to know how you get along with other kids and what you do when you have conflicts. Quality television addresses these questions and stimulates curiosity by posing new questions as well.”

The good news for guilt-ridden moms and dads is the number of quality kids' shows on the air now. “This may come as a surprise to parents,” says Dr. Arnold, “because a lot of them don't ever watch kids' programming and assume it's like it was when they were young. They don't realize that there's a lot of good stuff on now, a lot less violence and a lot more positive role models. Parents can make use of all this good programming by finding out what their children's favorite shows are and watching along with them, creating opportunities to have discussions about their kids' feelings and values.”

These seemed like wise words. Did others behind today's quality children's shows also know things about our kids that we parents should know? Here are some who did.

Bette-Jane Raphael is an editor-at-large for FAMILY CIRCLE.

“It's very difficult when you're young to hear, ‘You're different.’ ”

Sue Rose, creator and executive producer of Pepper Ann

To me, the most important message you can give children is that they are what they are, and what they are is just fine.

When I was 11, my mother gave me a copy of *Harriet the Spy*. I had never seen any character like that. She was a girl, a contemporary, who was quirky. She wore

jeans and sneakers and had glasses. I remember how important it was for me just to see that she existed.

On our show we have Pepper Ann, who's 12. She's a little awkward, but cute and feisty. She deals with a lot of the insecurities a kid her age has to deal with, but she has this remarkable optimism that helps her get beyond them.

It would be a wonderful world if parents were involved in finding alternative role models for their children. It's important for both boys and girls to see that there are differ-

"Kids want to be **respected** and liked—and also heard."

have—that teaches our children crucial lessons.

For instance, we talk a lot about conflict resolution. That's fine, but it's at those times when a child sees us in a stressful situation—sees how we are in traffic, say, and how we handle it, whether we get angry, or calm down and think—that a lot of learning takes place.

If you tell your children it's important to share, they need to see you, their parents, share with each other, with them, with the community. If you tell your children it's important to respect each other, then they need to see you, their parents, respecting each other and supporting each other and them, and treating them and their ideas and their emotions as worthy of respect.

It's fine to say to children, "Listen to what we say." But more than anything, they watch what we do. They watch how we treat others.

"Kids have a tremendous sense of fairness." *Deborah Forte, executive producer of Scholastic Entertainment's Goosebumps*

Goosebumps is produced for 8- to 12-year-olds. Many children this age love scary stories, and we want to give our viewers age-appropriate scares mixed with humor, and safe ways to watch kids like themselves take chances and have things

work out for them. We've found that kids' honest reactions to our shows tell us a lot about them.



For kids 8-12, *Goosebumps* combines its scares with humor.

For instance, one of our stories was told from the point of view of someone the audience thought was a boy. But in the end he turned back into what he *really* was: a dog. But since the boy was good, our viewers felt it was unjust that he ended up as a dog. This reinforced for us what a tremendous sense of fairness kids have.

Of course if you're a parent, you know that one of kids' constant refrains is, "It's not fair." You especially hear this as they get older. When they feel unjustly punished or accused, they feel very bad about it.

In order not to let them down in this way, it's important to know how your children feel, and most of the time their feelings are articulated when they're comfortable confiding in you, when there is a relationship of trust, where they understand they are respected. Kids, especially as they approach adolescence, want to be respected and liked and *heard*. Talking to them—spending a significant amount of time talking and listening to them—is critical to having a successful relationship with them.

At any age, if a child feels comfortable confiding in you, and saying exactly how he feels, whether it's a good feeling or a bad feeling, it takes a tremendous burden off of him. Because he knows he's not alone. ■

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"Yum!"



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