parents' answer book generations

# Mr. Rogers, Barney, Pepper Ann, More

# What Kids I was Can Ieach You

By Bette-Jane Raphael

s 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 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.

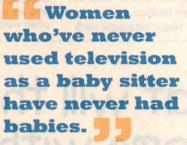
"Television is a great medium for telling stories," he says, "and you can teach a huge amount through stories.

"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.



## "It's very difficult when you're young to hear, 'You're different.' "

Sue Rose, creator and executive producer of Pepper Ann

o 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-



ent kinds of people in the world and that that's O.K.

It's very difficult when you're young to hear, "You're different," because you want to be the same. What we as parents can do is help celebrate the differences.

shows a parent can love.

We have to try and do this even though we ourselves are usually complete embarrassments to our teens and preteens! I think this is because kids have a certain image they want to portray, and a parent shows that there is this dimension to them—that they are children—they don't want other kids to see. Having a parent hug them, or say something about them, or about anything...is mortifying.

You have to be pretty secure in yourself to suffer the attitudes of children toward you. It's part of the job.

#### "Find time to listen carefully to your kids."

Michael Loman, executive producer of Sesame Street

he adults on Sesame Street make the childrenand the puppets—feel good. They hug them, they deal with them very serious-

ly, they listen carefully, they don't treat their concerns frivolously,

and they're supportive of them.

The way they behave is the way we believe adults should be with children. For instance, there is a show where Elmo keeps wanting Maria's attention. But it's an especially busy day at the Fixit Shop, and while Maria tries to listen to him, she gets distracted several times. Finally, Elmo gets very upset

and Maria sits down with him and explains what has happened and says she's sorry. And in that moment she connects with what Elmo has been trying to talk about and asks him to tell her more. And Elmo gets more and more excited about what he is telling her, and he forgets that he was not given enough time by her earlier on.

The reality of life is that there are times when, because of the demands of the moment, you don't have enough time to be with your kids. And it's good to be honest with them and explain that to them. And at the same time find a moment to listen to the child and to go into his world.

#### "Children worry that no one else could possibly feel what they feel."

Patricia Lavoie, creator and producer of Wimzie's House

n Wimzie's House, the experience for our young viewers is an emotional one. That's where the learning happens. Children watch the characters on the show have an emotional experience, and it touches them where they live. They learn that others feel the way they do-scared or embarrassed or sadwhich is a really crucial lesson. All of us, even we adults, often think that what we feel no one else could possibly be feeling. There's a definite sense of security in knowing that you're not alone.

For children, sharing a parent's emotional experience can be particularly powerful. You're the No. 1 person in your child's life, and it's comforting for him to know that you have disappointments as well as happy moments. It's also illuminating for him to learn how you felt when you were a kid, to hear you say, "When I was your age, I fell down in front of a lot of people, and I couldn't stop myself from crying and I was very embarrassed." Just knowing that you, a parent, felt unhappy because of something you did when you were little helps a child understand that "it's O.K. for me to feel sad, since Mommy did..." You've validated the child's emotion, and that's like giving him a gift.

#### "It's important for parents to share their imaginations."

Carol Greenwald, executive producer of Arthur

rthur may dream of space aliens coming to Earth in one show, of losing his library book in another. We do a lot of dream sequences on Arthur because we're trying to support the power of kids' imaginations. We want to let the kids who watch the show know that it's really a great thing to have an imagination. We hope this will prompt them to explore their fantasies, maybe write stories about them.

In the same way, it's important for parents to share

their imaginations, and to support their kids' creativity by showing their own. They can share dreams they've had, or their love of books; they can share their interest in crafts or in other areas that give them a chance to be creative. Talking about those things, letting a child know they're an important part of life, that's essential to a kid's strong development.



Arthur supports a child's imagination.

"Children long for consistency." Fred Rogers, creator of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood

very day at the beginning of our Neighborhood visit, I go through the ritual of coming in the door, singing the same song and changing from my street clothes to a sweater and sneakers. One reason I do that is because I think children long to have predictability and consistency, particularly in their own homes. That's a major theme of the *Neighborhood*: helping children to know what to expect.

Of course, no matter how hard we try,

## "More than anything else, children watch what we do."

Adults on

seriously.

Sesame Street

take puppets'

concerns very

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things don't always happen the way we expect them to. If you're a parent, it's easy to feel guilty when you have to change plans and disappoint your child. But it can also be an opportunity to help children redirect their expectations.

So even though a sudden change in your plans might upset your child, it can give you a real chance to help him

or her learn to deal with life's future disappointments. That's an essential lesson, because if children can learn to work through disappointments in their early years, they should have a much easier time later on.

#### "To teach your child, slow down." Angela Santomero, co-creator of Blue's Clues

e all know preschool-

ers like to hear the same bedtime story, or watch the same video, over and over again. That's because they're trying to master it, to learn the story or the songs. Once they know it, they're on to the next thing.

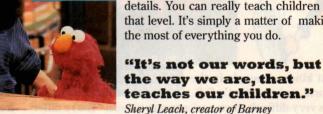
That's why we broadcast the same episode of *Blue's Clues* five days in a row. We know that by the end of the week the kids who watch the show are going to master the puzzles we set for them and feel great about themselves.

It's also why the pacing of Blue's Clues is a lot slower than

other programs. We pace it to give preschoolers time to answer the questions we ask them. We've found that if they have that time, they can come out with something brilliant.

I think it's important for a parent also to slow down with a child, to talk a bit about, say, what kind of snack he really wants, to figure that out. It's not a question of quality time,

but of taking the time you already have with your child and making the most of it, whether it's walking to get the mail or unpacking your groceries and talking about what you're doing and noticing different details. You can really teach children on that level. It's simply a matter of making the most of everything you do.



he messages that Barney sends are messages of support and kindness, messages of respect for the individual. He leads by example even more than by what he says. It's what he does and how he acts and his manner.

I think that we as parents could take a lesson from Barney. So much of what children learn when they're very young is nonverbal. It's not so much the words we use, but the whole way that we are—our attitude, how we be-



## "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

oosebumps 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.

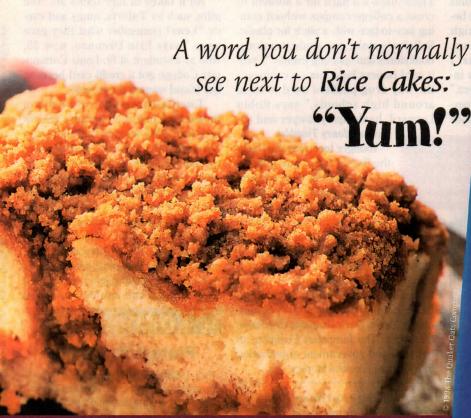
For instance, one of our stories was told from the point of view of someone the audience thought was a boy. But in the end he turned back into what he *really* was: a dog. But since the boy was good, our viewers felt it was unjust that he ended up as a dog. This reinforced for us what a tremendous sense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