DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 135 333 95 IR 004 289

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TITLE Teaching Children to Become More Critical Consumers of Television.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Child Development (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 5 Sep 76
GRANT OCD-90-C-247
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the American Psychological Association (Washington, D.C., September 5, 1976); For related documents, see IR 004 285-290

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aggression; *Children; Commercial Television; *Content Analysis; Critical Thinking; Educational Games; Evaluative Thinking; Parent Child Relationship; Stereotypes; *Teaching Methods; *Television; *Television Viewing; Violence

ABSTRACT

With television operating as an important socializing influence, children need to become critical consumers and they can be taught the necessary evaluative skills. Explicit discussion is seen as a means of developing awareness of various facets of TV programming, e.g., the relationship of reality to content, sterectyped images presented, any bias which may be introduced by the commercial basis of much TV production. Games are suggested as a method to be used by parents and children, and the TV industry is asked to provide more examples of how programs are produced as well as more explicit labeling for programs based on true incidents. The single most important means of transmitting these skills is seen to be coviewing and discussion with parents. (KP)

Teaching Children to Become More Critical Consumers of Television

September 5, 1976

by

Judith Lemon

TEACHING CHILDREN TO BECOME MORE CRITICAL CONSUMERS OF TELEVISION

Judith Lemon

Harvard University

Paper presented at the annual meeting
of the American Psychological Association

Washington, D.C.

September 5, 1976

I would like to share with you some of our ideas as to how the five critical evaluation skills which Aimee Leifer has just outlined might be taught to children. First I will discuss our teaching goals for each of the skills and then I will discuss how the five skills might be taught in various combinations. It is most important to us that the methods we develop can be used by parents with their children at home and at low cost. I should note that as we analyze more of our data, the ideas presented here might be modified in light of further results.

The first critical evaluation skill involves explicit and s neous reasoning about the reality of television content. We need to develop a number of approaches to facilitate ease and quality of discussion of what is true to life or worth knowing on television, especially since we found in our interviews that people across all ages were simply not accustomed to thinking about and discussing such issues. Explicit discussion requires careful thinking about television and would be made easier by the

acquisition of various new categories of thought and by practice in the application of these to the experience of viewing television.

The first set of new categories of thought to which we would like to expose children involves the complex concept of "reality" as it applies to television content. For example, television can be considered real because people really draw the cartoons or because the actors are real people. It can also be that portrayals conform to one's own experience, to usual events, to infrequent but possible events, or to impossible events. Second, we propose to point out to children different aspects of a television program they can attend to when they decide whether or not it is real. For example, they could look at the sets, the characters, or the plot line. We do not want to teach them to look at any particular aspect, but we want them to be aware that there are many different bases for a decision about whether or not a television program is real.

Third, we would like to give children an awareness of different patterns of stereotyped information on television. This involves teaching children to recognize the various television genres or program types as well as certain stereotyped portrayals. Most adults would agree that soap operas, medical shows, crime dramas and situation comedies have quite predictable formulae which they follow each week. Many people also agree that stereotyped race and sex portrayals as well as portrayals of aggressive behavior exist on television.

If the child could become more aware of these patterns, she would have a more complex frame of reference for discussing the reasons for her evaluations of the reality of television content. However, caution is in order, because we as social scientists must not simply perpetuate our own values when teaching these categories.

The second critical evaluation skill is the readiness to compare television content to sources of information outside television. These information sources include parents, books, magazines, newapapers and the child's own experience. Here, we want to teach children to have an inquiring perspective about whether or not things are real on television and to consult different sources of information for help in reasoning about reality. Parent/child coviewing and mutual discussion is important here, as for all the critical evaluation skills, because parents are themselves a primary outside source of information. Exposure to different magazines and newspapers and practice in discussing information from them in relation to reality decisions about television is also valuable.

The child's ability to compare what happens on television to his own experience (are all the women I know like Phyllis?) can also be facilitated by parent/child interaction, by example and by encouraging the child to practice such comparisons.

The third critical evaluation skill is the readiness to refer to knowledge about the industry in reasoning about television reality. We want to make clear to children that the industry is the source of television content and that people are making up television content because they want to get as many viewers as possible and to make a profit. We need to link knowledge about the industry directly to television content rather than teaching the economic facts of the television industry in isolation. Both parents and children can learn more about how and why television programs are produced and broadcast and then discuss what this suggests about the reality of program content.

The fourth critical evaluation skill is the tendency to find television content fabricated and inaccurate and the fifth critical evaluation skill

concerns the general evaluation, positive or negative, that a person holds of television. We believe that these two skills are attended to by our strategies to teach the first three critical evaluation skills. If we give children various ways to think about reality on television, if we show them how to notice the various kinds of stereotyped information on television, if we teach them to compare what they see on television to outside sources of information, if we give them various facts about how the industry influences content, we believe children will become actively skeptical about television content. They will become aware that much of it is fabricated and inaccurate, although they will hopefully still be able to learn the valuable things that are presented.

Since we found that people to a large extent see portrayals of their own sex and ethnicity group as inaccurate, this might be a good place to begin to teach children to compare what is on television to their own experience (critical evaluation skill number two) as well as to develop a broader skepticism of television in general.

I have spent the last few minutes talking about <u>what</u> we want to teach children, now I would like to spend a little time discussing <u>how</u> we plan to do it. Again, we want our teaching of these five critical evaluation skills to be easily transferable to the home environment at minimum cost. We see working with parents as our primary objective, and we will be developing methods which parents can use with their children while watching television and discussing its content.

Perhaps as a prelude to parent/child coviewing and discussion, information new to both of them could be introduced through various prepared games. Attractive board games, competitive with commercially popular games, could serve to teach ways of categorizing television reality, program type formulae,

stereotyped portrayals, ways to compare television content to outside information, and connections between the television industry and television content.

There could also be less structured games which would give the children the opportunity to practice various critical evaluation skills. For example, a group of children could be challenged to figure out what is fake about a particular television program. Children seem to enjoy making fun of commericals once they understand them, perhaps they could learn to deal with entertainment programming in a similar way.

Another approach might involve creating a setting for practice in counter-attitudinal advocacy. If a child believes medical shows are real, she is to compose a speech arguing why they are not real, perhaps comparing Marcus Welby to h own doctor. The game of twenty questions could be modified so that a group of children try to guess another child's reason for thinking a particular television program is not real.

Games are all well and good, but the real heart of the matter will be careful, thoughtful interaction with the child singly or in small discussion groups. It is clear from our data that a lot of our time should be spent just watching and talking about television with children. Discussion of different reasons for evaluating the reality of television content will be modeled for children and children will be engaged in discussion on these topics. We will compile a list of topics which we want to talk about with children as we watch television with them, topics which directly pertain to the program being watched and to what we want to teach for the five critical evaluation skills. One of our major tasks will be working out how best to communicate the various kinds of information and teach the various skills to children of different ages and developmental stages.

Informal discussion and coviewing by parents and children is a teaching method which will fit naturally into a home. It is easy for parents to do. We believe it is also right for parents to do, because it returns some control of an important socialization agent to the parents. In time, we hope that our results can be used by teachers in grade schools and high schools, especially for those aged children who are notorious for resisting parental influence. We would like to see all children become critical consumers of television because we believe that television as a socializer will be around in our culture for a long time.

Now, a few words for the television industry. We would like to commend a television production which helped several of our subjects to understand how cartoons are made. Evidently, a Pink Panther cartoon episode demonstrated how cartoons are drawn and made quite an impression on the children who saw it. Concrete operational children are interested in how things work, and this episode explicitly showed them. Perhaps the industry could provide more examples of how programs are produced, focusing especially on crime drama, action-adventure, and situation comedies.

Finally, children pay attention to and believe the labels you have put on television programs such as The FBI and Dragnet. Because the tag lines say that the incidents are true but the names have been changed to protect the innocent, some children believe these programs are the most real on television, even though they represent only the cases successfully and quickly solved and the aggression is most likely exaggerated. Although we do not know the effects of tags which disclaim the reality of a television program, we suggest that the industry consider this possibility. On SWAT the tag could go, "In the program you are about to see, aggression

is portrayed as a legitimate and necessary way for the police to keep the peace. This is done to make the program exciting in order to attract a large audience. Only a very small percentage of real policemen ever use such violent means during the course of their careers. So be aware, the material on this program might be hazardous to your mental health."