



## Media Education in the Early Years

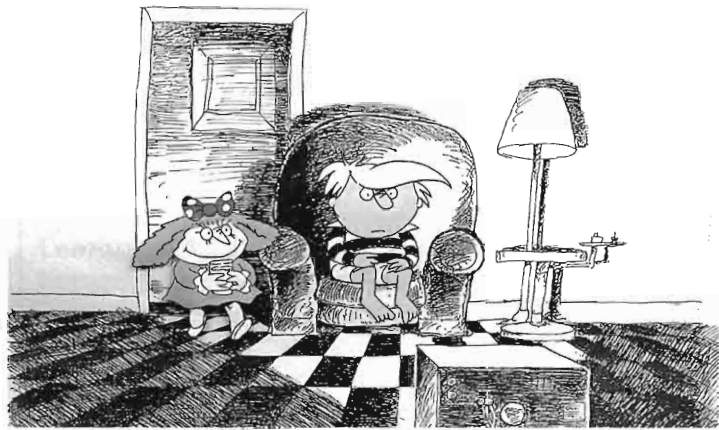
Television is a part of most children's lives, entertaining, informing and educating them from a very early age. Now, more than ever, educators are focusing on what, how much and what type of media children are engaging with. The ACTF is frequently asked by early primary educators and parents what television and other media young children should be viewing and what impact the media has on them. The changes in curricula across Australia to include media literacy in the literacy and English syllabuses are a positive strategy that recognizes the importance of media education for

children from a very young age. Young children are now playing video and computer games, visiting the internet, listening to music and watching films, but TV is still their favourite form of media.

All available research indicates that viewing age-appropriate programs can be valuable for young children. Go to the online Parenting Research Centre (<http://www.parentingrc.org.au>) and click on 'Information for parents' to see an excellent summary of Australian research pertaining to children and media use.

*Australian children begin watching television from an early age, with an average of 44 minutes [per day] at four months building to two and a half hours [per day] by four years. Almost half of children aged 5 to 12 years watch more than two hours per day, and 15 per cent spend over an hour per day playing video games.<sup>1</sup>*

Most experts agree that young children should not be viewing more than 15-30 minutes per day of carefully chosen, age-appropriate television, and it is preferable for parents or care givers to view with them.<sup>2</sup>



can show active engagement with a show by singing and dancing or involving it in pretend play later.

- Repeatedly watching the same TV show increases a young child's understanding of the show.

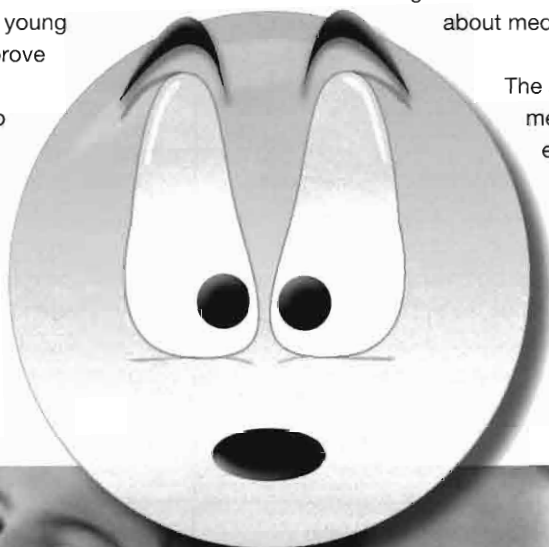
ings in what you experience (facial expressions, sound, colour) to taking social responsibility and making active choices and changes in your life (such as not watching or playing violent shows or games).

Each person's level of media literacy depends upon many factors: age, level of cognition, the social domain of the viewer, the culture of the viewer and media skills and knowledge. Like verbal and written literacy skills, media literacy cannot be studied in isolation from the meanings which readers produce.

What do we know about the positive outcomes of children viewing well-chosen television programs?

- A child who watches high-quality programs with educational content is likely to spend more time reading and doing educational activities.
- Challenging and educational shows can increase a child's academic development. In a young child they can improve pre-reading skills.
- A preschooler who watches more educational TV is likely to watch more informative TV when older.
- Young children

Just as children need to acquire the knowledge, skills and abilities to enable them to read, they also need to learn to read television to develop media literacy skills. This helps children to understand the difference between 'real' and 'fantasy' on TV, and to understand the persuasion methods used in advertising. It also teaches them about media bias.



The stages of media literacy range from recognizing the most superficial mean-

Children form good viewing habits in the first 5-8 years. Modelling critical viewing in educational settings and discussing TV rules with parents has been shown to be effective in early years. As a child gets older, parents and teachers tend to have less influence over a child's TV selection. This suggests that educators and parents should become involved in a child's TV viewing early in his or her life.

Television is an engaging media via which sensitive and controversial issues may be discussed with children, providing educators, caregivers and parents with a common point of reference to discuss issues that are often difficult to introduce in a vacuum.



# Fact Box: Child Development and Media

*Children and adults watch, think and understand television and other media very differently*

|   | <b>Age 2 to 5</b>  | <b>Age 6 to 8</b>  | <b>Age 10 to 12</b>  |
|---|--|--|--|
| Average media use and preferences       | Interest in TV growing, views 1+ hr per day.   | Views 2+ hrs TV. Growing interest in popular adult drama, comedy, news, science and natural world TV programs. Using computers, music CDs, games and movies.   | Interest in TV still high, views 3+ hrs per day. Music, movies, games and internet increasing in use.  |
| Understanding of media formats, story   | Has trouble following and remembering stories and characters – may not recognize cause and effect. Responds to simple characters: animals, children, parent figures.   | Remembers and understands simple stories. Cannot identify stereotypes easily. Finds news narratives difficult to decode. Understands formats of infotainment, some drama genres.                               | Understands and remembers content and stories well. Takes an interest in news, infotainment and stereotypes.   |
| Understanding that media is constructed | May not know TV isn't always real. May not know difference between news and fiction.   | Knows that TV isn't always real, prefers fiction over factual media. News viewed uncritically.   | Trusts news, factual media and reality TV but can deconstruct some fiction. Emerging critical awareness of media techniques and symbols.   |
| Understanding of commercials            | Looks at TV when a commercial starts. Pays a lot of attention to commercials. Doesn't know there is a difference between commercials and programs. Trusts commercials. | Remembers commercials and products. Pays a lot of attention to commercials. Can tell the difference between a commercial and the program. Begins to recognize that the purpose of a commercial is to persuade. | Desire for 'iconic' brands and peer-validated brands. Less interested in commercials. Knows the difference between programs and commercials. Knows that the intent of the commercials is to persuade and understands some persuasion techniques. |
| Media responses                         | Likely to imitate things on TV. Prefers media with high fantasy content – cartoons preferred form. Uninterested in news. Enjoys music and educational programs on TV.  | Frightened by realistic emotional and physical violence, including news. May be influenced by media, positively or negatively, depending on social, cultural and personal factors.                             | Media use and responses highly moderated by social, cultural and personal factors, including gender, cognitive level, emotional maturity, and prior knowledge of the media form and content.   |

**TELEVISION IS AN ENGAGING MEDIA VIA WHICH SENSITIVE AND CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES MAY BE DISCUSSED WITH CHILDREN, PROVIDING EDUCATORS, CAREGIVERS AND PARENTS WITH A COMMON POINT OF REFERENCE**



**LEVELS OF MEDIA LITERACY THAT SHOULD BE ACHIEVED – EARLY YEARS**

**Ages 4-6**

**Learns to discriminate between reality and fantasy**

- ✓ Learns about cartoons, puppets and real actors
- ✓ Media special effects – how does Superman fly?
- ✓ Creates a simple storyboard and flip book and uses a still camera to create a story.
- ✓ Demonstrates an emerging awareness and use of different multimedia, eg. can use the ACTF's multimedia creation tool *Kahootz*.

**Identifies Advertising**

Young children need to learn to discriminate between what is real and what is fantasy in the media. Concepts that should be explored include cartoon characters and real actors, advertising, media special effects and how the media constructs images.

Students should be taught to identify the basic subject or elements in a picture in a book (relating it to the text), a photograph, a TV show or a film. Accurate observation is important, but understanding visual relationships is also very important.

**Ages 7-8**

- ✓ Distinguishes between different forms of media and understands that all are constructed, eg. radio, TV, films, print,

group to create a DVD, poster, newspaper/magazine or PowerPoint.

- ✓ Understands that media messages have values.
- ✓ Understands a media narrative sequence and sub-plots.
- ✓ Identifies and demonstrates awareness of the impact of basic camera shots, movements and angles, eg. high, low, and eye-level angles, zoom etc.

The ACTF has free online kits for children to learn all about the language of the media. Go to the online Learning Centre at <http://www.actf.com.au> and select 'Live Action Kit' and 'Animation Kit'.

The ACTF collects and makes available current research and articles that give information and advice about the media's use of young children and also has extensive resources, many of them free, to support teachers wishing to include media education in their programs. The good news is that the ACTF DVDs that are linked to the following activities are recommended by each state and territory education department, and they are very easy to use in cross-curriculum programs as well. Each ACTF resource is accompanied by free lesson plans in the online Learning Centre at <http://www.actf.com.au>



**JUST AS CHILDREN NEED TO ACQUIRE THE KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND ABILITIES TO ENABLE THEM TO READ, THEY ALSO NEED TO LEARN TO READ TELEVISION TO DEVELOP MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS.**

**Identifies basic elements in still and moving pictures**

- ✓ Shows an emerging awareness of symbols and conventions, eg. close-ups, music, special effects and voice style.

**Identifies different types of stories**

- ✓ Retells meanings
- ✓ Makes connections with own experiences

digital etc.

- ✓ Emerging knowledge and understanding of genres, eg. drama, comedy, news, western, reality TV etc.
- ✓ Shows emerging awareness of stereotypes – goodies and baddies.
- ✓ Demonstrates increasing knowledge of symbols, eg. gold = wealth, and identifies symbolic use of music, eg. spooky.
- ✓ Understands that media productions are created by many people using different technologies, who work in a

**Getting started with critical and positive television viewing**

Help children develop critical viewing skills. Viewing television is an active process involving perception, learning, thinking, and memory. Television can teach and encourage the imagination, creative play and social development if it is included in family life and school programs in a positive way. Listen to the children's interpretations of programs and discuss them.

- Ask children to keep a diary of the TV they watch over one week, or, for the very young, hold a class discussion and help them to create a large TV Map on a wall chart of what they watch. For the 7-8 year olds, rather than a discussion of the following points, you may wish them to provide the information in their diary under headings.



## ALL ABOUT ME AND TV

Encourage the children to design symbols or icons to denote type of program (genre), eg. a laughing face for comedy, a cartoon icon for animation, etc.

1. What do I like on TV? What are my favourite programs and why? (Draw a picture of your favourite character.)



There are many TV adaptations of popular children's books that can be viewed and discussed. The teacher should sit with the children and moderate the viewing so that questions can be dealt with and ensure that children understand the story or learning activity. Television adaptations of quality books have been shown to improve interest in beginning reading skills in young children and in encouraging older reluctant readers.

Some of the ACTF's *Kaboodle* anthology of stories on DVD such as 'There's a Sea in my Bedroom' and 'Thing' are adaptations of loved picture books for ages 4-8.

- View the entire story and then discuss what children remember.



Encourage children to write to TV stations about the scheduling of children's TV and programs they like or dislike. Children can also write to the ACTF about children's programs. All letters are answered. They can address their letters to:

The Australian Children's Television Foundation: level 3, 145 Smith Street, Fitzroy, Victoria 3065 Or by email to: [info@actf.com.au](mailto:info@actf.com.au)



- View again and pause at any point that there was confusion about the story or characters.
- The third viewing can focus on developing media literacy and critical literacy.

Pause on particular shots and ask 'what size shot is this – wide, medium or close? Get children to make a frame with their thumbs and index fingers beforehand and practise the shots by framing people in the classroom. Discuss the effects of each. Eg. Why is this character in close-up in this shot?

Discuss the camera angle. Why are 'baddies' frequently framed from a low camera angle so we appear to be looking up at them? What would happen if we framed them from a high angle?

ABOVE: NOAH & SASKIA STUDENT ILLUSTRATION  
RIGHT: *THING*, AN ANIMATION FROM KABOODLE

2. When do I usually view TV?
3. Where do I watch it?
4. Do I like to watch alone or with my family and friends?
5. Do I choose the programs or do other people?
6. Are TV programs for children on at good times or not?
7. How could TV for children be made better?

The ACTF has worksheets on black line masters that are used for the above activity. Email the ACTF for free copies: [info@actf.com.au](mailto:info@actf.com.au)

The commercial broadcasters currently schedule most children's TV programs at around 4.00pm, when few children are watching. Discuss when children would like to watch these programs.

Collate the results of the diaries on a Wall Map or collaborate with a class that is older to create graphs that show hours viewed, what percentage of the week is spent viewing, etc. (An excellent maths activity!)

### What's in a story?

Just as young children enjoy reading or being read the same story many times, they also need to learn about story structure on TV through viewing and discussing the same story several times. The ACTF's *Lift Off* and *Kaboodle* series have short animations and stories that help children develop reading, visual and critical literacy skills and provide many opportunities to engage children in discussing values, relationships and the world around them.

Using a DVD camera to demonstrate is a good idea as well. Even very young children are capable of holding the new light-weight cameras and may already be using them at home.

Children can make a storyboard or create their own short story using the camera shots and angles, or adapt a story from a picture storybook.

Did we see real people or actors? How do we know? Discuss some of the actors in *Lift Off*; for example Mark Mitchell, who plays Mr Fish, the sets and locations and fantasy elements; Lotis the lift, Beverley the magic plant etc.

BELOW (TOP TO BOTTOM): WAKADOO, TWO IMAGES FROM KABOODLE – MOLLY MAKES MUSIC



### Real or Fantasy?

Discuss why puppets and cartoons are not real, and how stories are created with actors and sets, etc. The ACTF's *Lift Off* TV series for ages 4-8 incorporates puppets, actors and animations as well as documentary segments. Explore the free online lessons that help children learn about how the series is constructed. Pause after each segment and discuss the signs and conventions that signal to us what type of TV we are watching.

#### Ask:

Were there people acting, cartoons or puppets? How are puppets operated? Who does the voices? How do we know when a story is a cartoon? What are special effects?



For the documentary segments: What did we see and hear that let us know that this was a real animal, person, place, etc?

### Commercials – What Are They?

Screen some popular TV commercials and discuss them with the class. Ask students to list their favourite television advertisements and their least-liked ones. Discuss these responses, considering questions such as: What makes an ad a good one? What makes it an unpopular one?

Children should learn to recognize different forms of commercials and to tell the difference between information and selling. View some commercials that depict families and friendship groups.

What are these advertisements selling?  
 What sorts of things are they telling us about their products?  
 What sort of words are they using?  
 What sorts of images are they using?  
 What are the mothers like?  
 What are the fathers like?  
 What are the children like?  
 What do these commercials show about the way members of the family are supposed to behave?

What types of families/family members are not included?  
 How do the advertisers use images, sound and words to convey the messages?

Are these real images of real people?  
 Is this real life?

Discuss the purposes of advertising and how it aims to influence our choice of goods and services.

Adbusters is site that critically deconstructs advertisements.  
<http://www.adbusters.org/home/>

The spoof advertisements for fast food are good discussion starters. See <http://adbusters.org/spoofads/food/babyfry/>



Compare images from documentaries of real people.

### Values

Discuss the difference between wanting and needing.

The ACTF's *I Think ...* philosophy and values education kit explores fundamental issues about wanting and needing, peer pressure and the notion that we are sold things with the promise that they will bring us success or happiness. The kit uses TV to explore philosophical themes with children aged 5 and up. It comprises a Teachers' Guide Book, a video or DVD anthology, a CD with the book and additional online units and a website. *I Think ...* is based on the animated short films *Munch Kids* from the ACTF's *Lift Off* series, in which children discuss important and puzzling big ideas and wonder about the solutions to environmental and personal issues. The Learning Federation is adding all twenty-four *I Think ...* animations to its online digital resources for schools. The animations provide an excellent resource for media literacy as well, because each animation uses different genres: cell, clay, collage, digital, etc.

Finally, discuss television and other media use with parents and encourage them to build a DVD library of age-appropriate quality videos for children, in the same way that they build a book library. Research shows that children who view stimulating shows are likely to spend more time discussing them and reading and doing educational activities.

### Some Recommended Books

***Comprehending Visual and Media Texts***, R.I.C. Publications, 2001.

There are three texts, one each for Lower, Middle and Upper Primary. These resources cover a variety of visual texts (newspapers, advertisements, movies, logos and symbols, books, magazines, videos, etc.) and activities to accompany them (target audiences, stereotyping, animation, comparing books to films, etc). The activities can be used independently or included into specific units of work. The books include black line masters. The books are linked to Outcomes in English. Highly recommended.

***Viewing: Practical activities for Early Childhood Students***, Adell Griffiths, Australian Teaching Aids Publishing, 2000.

***Viewing for Learning***, Curriculum Corporation (Australia), Dolphin Press, 1995. (Yrs K-3)

***Critical Literacies – In the Primary Classroom***, Michele Knobel and Annah Healy (eds), Primary English Teaching Association, NSW, 1998.



ABOVE: *FIRST DAY*  
RIGHT: *I THINK ...*  
EDUCATIONAL KIT

***What's the Story – Making Meaning in Primary Classrooms***, Kay Lowe, Primary English Teaching Association, NSW Australia, 2002

***Teaching Viewing and Visual Texts***

– ***Primary***, Robin Quin and Barry McMahon, Curriculum Corporation, Victoria, 1996.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Royal Australasian College of Physicians, 2004. Report Children and the media: Advocating for the future <http://www.racp.edu.au/hpu/paed/media/evidence.htm> Accessed 20 October 2006

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Lee Burton has had over thirty years experience in the education sector. Prior to her appointment as Education Manager at the Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) she was a Senior Lecturer in Media Education at RMIT University Melbourne, training primary and secondary teachers. Lee is also a writer, researcher and media critic. She has published over 200 media studies and media literacy curriculum resources and is one of the founders of the Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM Vic).

Lee's role at the ACTF is to manage the ACTF's online Learning Centre, the production of relevant resources for teachers to support the use of ACTF products in the classroom, and to support the teaching of media education via resources and workshops for teachers.

The ACTF is a national non-profit organization, established by the Australian Education Council in 1982. The ACTF's mission is to provide Australian children with entertaining media made

especially for them that makes an enduring contribution to their cultural and educational experience. Our newsletters *Care for Kids* and *Education News* are sent to every Australian school library. The Learning Centre section of our website features teaching resources including over 200 free lesson plans covering all KLAS, topics and themes taught from K-12.

To purchase any of the ACTF resources featured in this article, you can order from the ACTF's online Education Catalogue or email the ACTF at [info@actf.com.au](mailto:info@actf.com.au) to find out more.

To obtain a free copy of the ACTF's teaching kit *Media Literacy in the Primary School*, with many useful hotlinks to sites across the world, email: [bec.mcphree@actf.com.au](mailto:bec.mcphree@actf.com.au)

