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# Some Children Under Some Conditions: TV and the High Potential Kid

Robert Abelman, Ph.D.
Cleveland State University
Cleveland, Ohio

December 1992
Number 9206

TV & KIDS

RESEARCH-BASED DECISION MAKING SERIES

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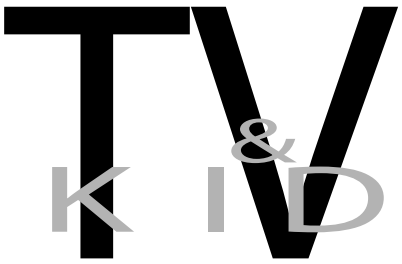


RESEARCH-BASED DECISION MAKING SERIES

# THE NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTER ON THE GIFTED AND TALENTED

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**About the Author...**

Dr. Robert Abelman is Professor of Communication at Cleveland State University. He is a board member of the National Council for Families and Television, along with such luminaries as Fred Rogers, Robert Keeshan and, until recently, the late Jim Henson. Dr. Abelman has served as program consultant for the Children's Television Workshop and the commercial television networks. He has written over 100 research-based publications, the most recent being the co-authored book *Television and the Exceptional Child: A Forgotten Audience* (Erlbaum, 1992).

## A Note From the Author

Since the establishment of television's popularity in the late 1940s, well over 4000 studies have been published examining the effects of the medium on children. For reasons explored in this monograph, few of these studies have addressed gifted children. Consequently, the bulk of the sources cited in the following pages come from the work of the author and his colleagues as part of Project KIDVID at Cleveland State University. Although specific research findings presented in the monograph are ascribed to individual publications, it should be assumed that any and all generic mention of "the research" (i.e., "the research states...") can be attributed to the collective knowledge generated by KIDVID. Similarly, all research summary statements, practical suggestions, and curricular activities come from this source.

Who are the gifted children contained in the research addressed in this text? How similar are they to the children in your home or classroom?

The definition of giftedness in the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988 (Public Law 100-297) is as follows:

> "Gifted and talented students" means children and youth who give evidence of high performance capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop such capabilities.

The research reported in this text concentrates on *intellectually* gifted children, and examines only those children school-labeled as such. In the decade since KIDVID's inception, nearly 5000 children and their parents have been involved in focus groups, survey research and/or controlled experiments at home or in the school. To best guarantee a sense of national representation in the research findings, the children have been fairly equally drawn from four locations: Hartford, CT; Austin, TX; Washington, DC; and Cleveland, OH.

Because gifted children are not included in Public Law 94-142 and states are not required by any federal law to provide special educational opportunities for these children, there is no standardized measure across states or within most states for determining which children do qualify for whatever special education opportunities are offered.

Nonetheless, there are two areas of commonality shared by all the children discussed here. The first is that they fall within the realm of intellectually gifted performance as ascertained by an individually administered IQ test (Stanford-Binet > 130). This proved to be the most generally used "definition" of giftedness across the many schools with special education opportunities that were employed in this research.

Otherwise, the children are quite heterogeneous. They come from diverse backgrounds reflective of nationwide samples. Some of the children are physically challenged. A few possess a learning disability in addition to intellectual prowess. Rarely did these differences come into play or outweigh the impact of their giftedness; where they do is clearly noted in the text.

The second area of commonality is that these children watch television. This proved to be the most definitive characteristic of all and one which most directly generalizes to your home or classroom.

# Some Children Under Some Conditions:
# TV and the High Potential Kid

Robert Abelman
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## ABSTRACT

This monograph examines the relationship between intellectually gifted children and television. It begins by offering generally accepted facts about gifted children, as identified in the special education and educational psychology literature. The questions this information raises with regard to television viewing and its potential effects are then presented and research-grounded answers, extracted from the most recent mass communication literature, are provided.

More specifically, the text explores how intellectual giftedness impacts on: (a) Television viewing habits; (b) The processing of television information; (c) Children's perceptions of reality of programming and advertising; and (d) The nature of parental mediation of viewing. In addition, the monograph examines: (e) The portrayal of gifted children in primetime programming; (f) Federal legislation impacting children's educational programming; and (g) The use of television in the special education classroom. Findings suggest that parents and educators of gifted children should consider television as a potentially positive and negative force in their children's lives. This is particularly so during preschool and early adolescence, when gifted children are arguably the most vulnerable and susceptible to often inaccurate, inappropriate or highly persuasive televised portrayals. A prescription for caregivers on how to best incorporate research findings into practical in-home and in-school activities, practices, and policies is extended.

# Some Children Under Some Conditions: TV and the High Potential Kid

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This monograph examines the relationship between intellectually gifted children and television. It begins by offering generally accepted facts about gifted children, as identified in the special education and educational psychology literature, and the questions this information raises with regard to television viewing and its potential effects. Research-grounded answers to these questions are then presented, extracted from the most recent mass communication literature.

Interestingly, one of the earliest research summary statements about the possible effects of television on youth is also one of the most appropriate with regard to exceptional children:

> For some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For other children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. (Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961, p. 1)

This suggests that children are a highly diverse group that respond very differently to particular situations. This simple observation underscores the fact that television does *not* have a singular or global effect on all children. However, in as much as the highly heterogeneous group of over one million children school-labeled "intellectually gifted" *share similar traits, habits, and practices,* particularly with regard to their general thirst for knowledge, eagerness to learn, and capacity for processing vast amounts of information (Sternberg & Davidson, 1986), patterns emerge in how these children use and/or abuse television.

## Gifted Children and Television

### Television Viewing Habits

Gifted children learn to speak and develop sophisticated language patterns well in advance of their age-mates. Their verbal and reading fluency and comprehension improve rapidly (Cohn, Cohn, & Kanevsky, 1988). Does this mean that they might also be capable of watching television at an earlier age than their peers?

TV viewing does not begin at an earlier age. However, gifted preschool children have been found to watch significantly more hours of television per week than nongifted children (Abelman & Rogers, 1987). Because of their ability to coordinate and comprehend television information, most of their viewing is active—that is, gifted children are less likely to sit in front of the television set mesmerized and confused by programming and are more likely to be involved in program content and story line.

## Comprehension of Television Information

Gifted children exhibit a high level of complexity and abstraction in their questions and responses, which reflects phenomenal perceptiveness and sensitivity to relationships and patterns of knowledge (Barbe & Renzulli, 1981; Roedell, Jackson, & Robinson, 1980). They are also particularly able to recognize the nature of problems, to select strategies that are appropriate for problem solving, and to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information (Glasser, 1985). Does this make them more competent at piecing together TV story lines, plot developments, and selling strategies in commercial advertisements at an early age?

The research suggests that gifted children of all ages are typically attracted to more complex forms of programming, which offer room for intellectual growth, a challenge in terms of story line and plot development, and more interesting and sophisticated characterizations. They also have a better understanding of various basic narrative techniques used by producers (e.g., editing) and what they contribute to the program than other children, although the more complex techniques employed in adult-oriented programming is not as easily comprehended and becomes somewhat problematic (Abelman, 1992).

## Television Advertising

These findings generalize to commercial advertising. Gifted children have been found to be efficient at identifying the selling strategies in child- and adult-oriented advertising, which makes these commercials less persuasive (Sprafkin, Gadow, & Abelman, 1992). However, the level of sophistication of most adult-oriented advertisements results in the belief that the claims are more likely to be true, that the fabricated image is really a part of the consumable product, and that these commercials are less likely to be deceiving than those targeted at children (Abelman, 1984).

## Program Preferences

Gifted children have a passion for learning and absorbing knowledge (Scruggs & Cohn, 1983; Sternberg & Davidson, 1985, 1986). What role does a readily available, easily accessible, and non-threatening source of social information such as television play in their socialization? Does it lead to an attraction to more sophisticated, adult-oriented programming for which they are not emotionally prepared?

Gifted children are bored by similar plots, program reruns, and standardized program formats (Abelman, 1986). Educational programming is typically preferred over pure entertainment fare, but gifted children rapidly outgrow many of the informational programs still being watched by same-age peers. The paucity of available quality children's programs on broadcast television channels typically results in the consumption of adult-oriented programming.

Recent content analyses of commercial television's primetime programming indicate that children in starring or title roles are highly underrepresented (Abelman, 1993). Depictions of gifted children in primetime are even rarer, suggesting that limited role models exist in popular programming.

## Perceived Reality of TV Portrayals

On the whole, there are few differences in self-esteem and self-concept when comparing gifted and average children (Hoge & Renzulli, 1991). However, exceptional children have been found to be especially sensitive to social cues (Freeman, 1985) and often have special needs with respect to emotional health, social competence (Schneider, 1987; Zaffran & Colangelo, 1979), and peer relations (Janos, Fung, & Robinson, 1985). Does this make them more vulnerable to TV portrayals of social relationships and interactions?

Research suggests that young gifted children are likely to: (a) perceive many of the fictional characters found in more sophisticated adult-oriented programming as real and (b) fail to accurately comprehend many of the more complex visual techniques employed as narrative devices in these programs, leading to misinterpretation of televised information (Sprafkin, Gadow, & Abelman, 1992). During early-adolescence (a stage when children are arguably vulnerable to social influences), gifted children tend to watch a great deal of television (Abelman & Rogers, 1986) and may be especially attracted to fictional information about social interaction and behavioral roles. Unfortunately, gifted teens are poorly portrayed on commercial television.

## Parental Mediation

Gifted children have parents who are typically more conscious of their children's learning processes and factors that tend to advance or hinder intellectual and social progression (Gallagher, Kaplan, & Sato, 1983; Page, 1983). Do parents have more rules or regulations for how much television is watched or what programs are to be viewed when compared with other parents?

Research suggests that parents of gifted children are infrequent mediators of television viewing. However, when direct mediation *does* occur, it tends to be highly focused, purposeful, evaluative, and participatory (Abelman, 1987a, 1991a). Parents generally believe that television can have both a positive and negative cognitive-level effect on their gifted children. Special affective and social needs are also of great

concern to parents, and may suggest to them a special vulnerability to attractive televised portrayals.

## Government Intervention

Public Law 94-142, passed in 1975, guaranteed all exceptional children (except the gifted) free, appropriate, public education. Children with special disabilities have been extended telecommunications services according to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Brotman, 1990), but no such mandate has been made for children with special abilities. Is there any legislation that provides for the educational and telecommunications needs of gifted children?

The newly passed Children's Television Act of 1990 specifically reinforces broadcasters' obligations to the public in the form of service to children. The Act places restrictions on the amount of advertising that can appear in children's shows, requires that each station serve the specific educational and informational needs of children through programming and nonbroadcast efforts, and creates a national endowment to produce programming specifically directed toward the development of fundamental intellectual skills (Action for Children's Television, 1990). The Act has the potential to curtail the long-term dominance of mediocre and mundane programming on broadcast stations and offer greater diversity through cable outlets.

## Gifted Education

Special education is often seen as a collaboration of components that influence schooling, family, and community life (Goldberg, 1986). Curriculum for young gifted children should: (a) be based on interest and needs rather than on predetermined order or sequence of instruction; (b) access abstract and higher-level thinking processes, and (c) encourage creative and productive thinking (Karnes, Shwedel, & Kemp, 1985). Is there a place in gifted education for the incorporation of instructional television or use of broadcast television programming for instruction?

Television viewing is a learned behavior that extends and reinforces basic comprehension skills (i.e., determining theme, utilizing context cues, forming sequence and eliciting an awareness of cause and effect), and provides ample avenue for abstract and critical thinking (Bryant & Anderson, 1983). There exists a growing number of "television literacy" or "critical viewing/thinking skills" curricula available on the market (Brown, 1991) that incorporate television literacy (the skillful collection, interpretation, testing, and application of television information) into teaching agendas or interface such programs with more traditional curriculum areas (i.e., language arts, social studies). These have proven to be especially effective in gifted education (Abelman, 1987b, 1991b; Abelman & Courtright, 1983).

## Guidelines for Research-Based Decision Making

The following guidelines have emerged from the above review of research addressing television and gifted children. Each guideline is followed by a brief discussion of the most pertinent research evidence.

**Guideline One: Young gifted children spend significantly more hours in front of the television set than their same-age peers, but viewing does not necessarily warrant parental concern or dramatic time reductions or limitations.**

Discussion: Sizable viewership of television programming at a very early age is reflective of gifted children's natural attraction to accessible and interesting sources of information. TV viewing during the preschool years is not a dysfunctional behavior unless it is (a) taking the place of, rather than complementing, other viable means of information (e.g., books), (b) limiting interaction with parents and other children, and/or (c) resulting in long-term viewing habits of a similar nature. This is not usually the case and once children enter the formal school system, their overall TV viewing drops dramatically.

**Guideline Two: Parents are encouraged to make sure that the programming being watched matches their child's capability to follow story line and plot development and is sufficiently challenging.**

Discussion: Viewing gives gifted children an opportunity to observe and familiarize themselves with advanced or abstract concepts and relationships that are normally learned at a later age through other media (i.e., books). Similarly, viewing allows them to practice their perceptual abilities, developing linguistic and critical thinking skills, and puts their knowledge of the real world to the test.

**Guideline Three: Younger children should avoid program-length commercials.**

Discussion: Young gifted children are efficient at identifying the selling strategies in child-oriented advertising in general, but programs featuring a consumable product are hard-sell advertising campaigns that break the formal distinction between ad and program.

**Guideline Four: Pay-TV (cable, video rentals) currently provides the most reliable supply of quality educational, informational, and entertaining children's programs.**

Discussion: Only 4% of all broadcast television is programming specifically created for children; less than 8% of all public television programming is education fare for school-age children. Gifted children of all ages are attracted to and benefit most from more complex forms of programming, which offer room for intellectual growth, a challenge in terms of story line or plot development, and more sophisticated and interesting characterizations.

**Guideline Five: Primetime commercial television offers inadequate and inappropriate role models for gifted children.**

Discussion: Only 9% of all the new programming during the past decade has had one or more children in the starring or title role, despite the fact that over 17% of the nation's population is under 13 years of age. Gifted children are also highly underrepresented and typically depicted as social misfits.

**Guideline Six: The most effective forms of parental mediation of television are purposeful program selection and co-viewing with a child.**

Discussion: Parents of gifted children are not actively involved in their children's TV viewing. There are few rules about what, when, and how much to watch, and gifted children often watch alone. Co-viewing and discussing television allows parents to get a better feel for the role TV plays in their child's life and shows children that TV can be a family activity.

**Guideline Seven: In accordance with the Children's Television Act of 1990, parents can and should become involved in influencing the quality and quantity of local children's programming.**

Discussion: The Act has the potential to curtail the dominance of mediocre and mundane programming on broadcast stations and offer greater diversity through cable outlets. The problem lies in the implementation of the Act and getting stations and cable outlets to realize that a viable, reliable, and interested segment of the young viewing community is intellectually gifted.

**Guideline Eight: Television in the classroom has a place in gifted education.**

Discussion: The use of instructional television programming or commercial programming for instructional purposes is capable of accessing abstract and higher-level thinking processes, encouraging creative, critical and productive thinking, and maintaining a high level of interest in gifted children.

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# Some Children Under Some Conditions: TV and the High Potential Kid

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## Introduction

Roald Dahl's (1988) best selling children's book *Matilda* features an unquestionably gifted young girl and her rather unsophisticated parents who insist that Matilda watch "the telly" rather than indulge in her passion for reading. Early in the book we find the parents parked in front of the television set, passively eating TV dinners from aluminum receptacles and enjoying an evening of mindless entertainment. Meanwhile, four-year-old Matilda reflects upon her recent reading of *Great Expectations* and avoids television at all costs.

In reality, gifted children enjoy television as much as any other child, whether they have unsophisticated parents or not. National ratings reports suggest that by high school graduation, most children (regardless of being distinguished by an exceptional ability or disability) spend between 10-30% more hours in front of the television set than in the classroom. A recent study by the U.S. Government Education Department (Associated Press, 1992) reports that children's television viewing directly influences what and how much they read, reinforcing Richert's (1981, p. 20) decade-old observation that television is capable of "diverting the gifted from using their abilities."

The title character in John Irving's (1989) novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is an exceptionally bright, sensitive, and tragic young boy, with a favorite phrase for describing whatever he perceives as particularly disingenuous: "YOU KNOW WHAT THAT IS? THAT'S MADE FOR TELEVISION—THAT'S WHAT THAT IS." While not all television is misrepresentation, not all gifted children view the medium with as critical and cynical an eye as Owen Meany. "After all," suggested renowned special educator Barbe (1965, p. 175) nearly three decades ago, "it is important to realize that although gifted children may be mentally advanced, they are still children, and their advanced mentality does little to help them through the problems of growing up."

Interestingly, despite our awareness of the power and prevalence of television and our collective knowledge about the unique qualities and abilities of intellectually gifted children, the close association between these high potential children and this high profile electronic medium has rarely been mentioned outside the pages of fiction:

- Of all the many concerns parents express about raising an academically gifted child and recognizing factors that might hinder or excel development, television is rarely brought up (Yahnk-Walker, 1991);

- Of all the "how to" books on the market that give insight and guidance into the proper nurturing and special education of exceptional children (Alvino, 1985), television is but an occasional footnote. Children's literature, on the other hand, has been given due attention (Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991);
- The National Parents and Teachers Association has made television a priority agenda item; the National Association for Gifted Children has not.

Perhaps the reason for this lack of concern about television's impact on gifted children by parents, professionals, and gifted child advocates is the belief that there is nothing to be concerned about. Like the Owen Meanys and Matildas of literature, intellectually gifted children may be perceived by caregivers as far too bright and astute to fall for the wild and wooly tales that television tends to weave. Little attention has been given to how much and what they actually watch because it is generally assumed that they are attracted to only educational or informational programming (Abelman, 1987a) and, thus, immune to the more unattractive and potentially harmful messages and portrayals.

On the contrary, according to Palmer (1988):

- Only 4% of all broadcast television is programming specifically created for children;
- Less than 8% of all public television programming is educational fare geared for school-age children;
- Approximately 90% of all child viewing takes place on weekdays, yet not one of the four commercial networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX) supports a regular weekday program schedule for children;
- All totaled, children's programming—educational, informational, and commercial—makes up *less than 11%* of most children's TV diet.

The rest of their viewing is comprised of programming with some rather adult and often complex themes and activities. This fare also serves as a vehicle for highly sophisticated advertising that has the most stoic and strong-minded of adults buying name-brand products and singing inane jingles. Broadcast television is a highly accessible source of information and entertainment with much potential, yet was once coined a "vast wasteland" by Newton Minow, past-Chair of the Federal Communications Commission.

Non-broadcast television, particularly cable, provides a greater supply of more attractive offerings geared specifically for children. Here we find channels solely devoted to children's programming (i.e., Nickelodeon, Disney) or which offer new, original children's shows as part of its regular lineup (i.e., "Fairy Tale Theater" on Showtime). Unfortunately:

- Children in many rural and urban areas do not yet have access to cable. At the time of this writing there is less than 75% saturation across the nation

and analysts predict (Dorr & Kunkel, 1990) that 25-30 million households will still be without cable in the year 2000;

- Cable and other non-broadcast media such as VCRs and satellite all require some form of direct payment to obtain the children's programming they provide. Kids who are poor or whose parents are unwilling to pay for television programming are less likely to make use of these technologies.

In fact, gifted children are not quite like the Owen Meanys and Matildas of literature. They *are* genuinely attracted to television and *are* often exposed to programming for which they may not be emotionally or socially prepared. This raises numerous questions and concerns with regard to the true nature of gifted children's televiewing and its potential impact. The picture painted by the popular press with regard to the effects of television on youth is quite pessimistic:

- "My Family Was Addicted to TV" announces a *Good Housekeeping* (August 1988, p. 32) headline;
- "Is TV Too Sexy?" teases the feature story in a recent issue of *McCall's* (October 1991, p. 100);
- "Can TV Cause Divorce?" queries *TV Guide* (September 27, 1987, p. 4);
- *Parents* magazine asks "What TV Does To Kids" (June 1987, p. 100), wonders "How TV Violence Affects Kids" (January 1991, p. 113), and provides "expert" testimony to count the ways.

Does any or all this apply to the gifted child? What does the scientific literature have to offer?

## The Scientific Literature

The bulk of the research defining and investigating intellectual giftedness and the body of scientific studies exploring the effects of television on youth were developed simultaneously (since the late 1940s) albeit from different academic disciplines. Rarely, however, did research in educational psychology concern itself with mass media. Instead, more traditional and credible modes of education and socialization have been explored (Kauffman, 1992). Even rarer were instances when communication research addressed exceptional populations of children. Instead, audiences more easily identifiable, accessible, and generalizable to the mass audience were the focal point (Van Evra, 1990).

Nonetheless, one of the earliest research summary statements about the effects of television on youth is also one of the most appropriate with regard to gifted children, and a good place to start. It is provided in Schramm, Lyle, and Parker's *Television in the Lives of Our Children* (1961) and reads:

> For some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For other children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. (p. 1)

Sound vague and terribly inconclusive? Many scholars have thought so and interpreted this statement as being nothing more than a reflection on the rather poor state of scientific inquiry at the time of its writing. "Until television research improves and more definitive testimony can be offered about television's impact," stated many a television industry executive and government official, "little can or should be done to alter programming or policy with regard to children" (Baker, 1969). However, in the three decades since this statement was made, with research instrumentation and methodology improving significantly over the years, findings from thousands of studies support the same conclusion: "For some children under some conditions. . . ."

In actuality, this statement identifies a truism that many scholars apparently fail to realize but most parents know full well: *Children are a highly diverse group that respond very differently to particular situations.* This simple observation underscores the fact that television does *not* have a singular or global effect on all children. Where children come from, how they are reared, the personality they possess, the friends they have, their unique abilities and disabilities, their self-perception, and the many intangibles that comprise being a child as well as an individual. . . all impact on what aspects of television are attractive, what is interesting, and what children take from their overall televiewing experience.

This, of course, applies to gifted children as well. However, in as much as the highly heterogeneous group of over one million children school-labeled "intellectually gifted" *share similar traits, habits, and practices,* particularly with regard to their general thirst for knowledge, eagerness to learn, and capacity for processing vast amounts of information, patterns may emerge in how these children use and/or abuse television.

What follows is a summary of these patterns—that is, generally accepted facts about intellectually gifted children, as identified in the special education/educational psychology literature. The questions this information raises with regard to television viewing and its potential impact are then explored, and research-grounded answers to those particular questions, extracted from recent communication science investigations, are provided. Afterward, a prescription for caregivers (parents and teachers of gifted children) on how to best incorporate these answers into practical in-home and in-school activities, practices, policies and perceptions is extended. Appendix A contains TV Activities for the Home and School.

# Facts About Giftedness/Questions About TV

**Fact 1: Television Viewing Habits**

**Gifted children learn to speak and develop sophisticated language patterns well in advance of their age-mates. Their verbal and reading fluency and comprehension improve rapidly (Cohn, Cohn, & Kanevsky, 1988).**

**Question: Does this mean that they might also be capable of watching television at an earlier age than their peers?**

Currently, nearly 99% of all American households have at least one television set. Consequently, most children have access to television at a very early age and there is little distinction between gifted and non-gifted households. Research suggests, however, that the level of a child's cognitive sophistication does influence his or her social experiences, communication behavior, attitudes, needs, and motivations (Bryan, 1979; Elliot, 1979; Naremore & Hopper, 1990; Zigler & Farber, 1985), and is therefore a critically important determinant of television *viewing habits*.

With regard to young gifted children, this translates into significantly *more hours* in front of the television set than their same-age peers. Four and five year old children school-identified as intellectually gifted, for example, watch between 3.5 to 4 hours of television each day; typically 2-3 more hours per week when compared to other children (see Figure 1; Abelman & Rogers, 1987). During these formative preschool years, gifted children also watch more television than other exceptional children (i.e., learning disabled, emotionally disturbed), whose viewing has been called "chronic" and "dysfunctional" by educational psychologists (Sprafkin & Gadow, 1986), and are more likely to watch alone (Abelman, 1990a).

Interestingly, from elementary school to high school, TV consumption among gifted children decreases. The amount of TV viewing by intellectually average children also decreases during this time, but at a gradual rate rather than the dramatic drop demonstrated by gifted children. School-age gifted children typically watch 2 hours less each day than their peers, as special education opportunities avail themselves and leisure time diminishes (Abelman, 1984, 1986). Unlike their nonlabeled counterparts, the existence of cable or VCRs does not increase the total amount of time spent in front of the television set. For gifted children, cable viewing typically displaces the same amount of broadcast viewing. Similarly, VCR use accounts for less than 2% of all media time (Dorr & Kunkel, 1990; Kubey & Larson, 1990).

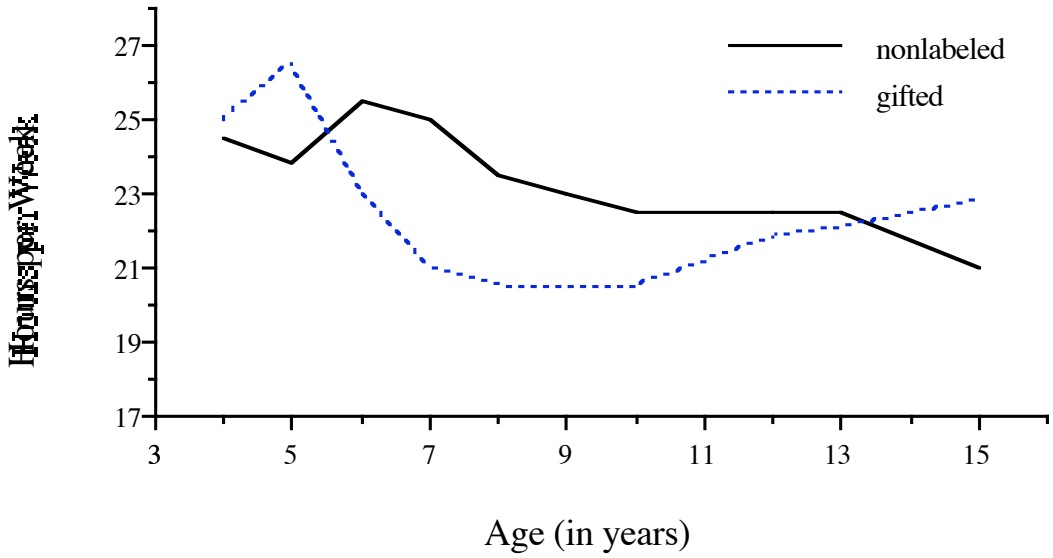


Figure 1. Television viewership of gifted and nonlabeled children.

**Fact 2:** **Program Comprehension**

**Gifted children exhibit a high level of complexity and abstraction in their questions and responses, which reflects phenomenal perceptiveness and sensitivity to relationships and patterns of knowledge (Barbe & Renzulli, 1981; Roedell, Jackson, & Robinson, 1980).**

**Question:** **Does this make them more competent at piecing together TV story lines and plot developments at an early age?**

Although gifted children do not view television at an earlier age than their intellectually average counterparts, they do tend to have the capacity to *watch* television at an earlier age. The distinction between "view" and "watch" is that the former refers to the passive act of sitting in front of the television set and being stimulated and titillated, while the latter refers to the actual processing and comprehension of program content (Abelman, 1992). Young gifted children's televiewing is a cognitively active activity.

In particular, two to five year old gifted children are better able to coordinate and recall story line, plot development, and character identification than their same-age peers. According to Sprafkin, Gadow, and Abelman (1992), they are therefore:

- less likely to sit in front of the television set mesmerized or confused by programming and more likely to be involved in program content;
- attracted to more complex forms of programming, which offer room for intellectual growth, a challenge in terms of story line or plot development, and more sophisticated and interesting characterizations;
- bored by similar plots, reruns, and tried and true program formats. While other children enjoy repeated programs because they are familiar and, thus, comfortable and predictable, most gifted children *do not* for the same reason.

Consequently, gifted children:

- quickly outgrow many of the educational and instructional children's programs still being enjoyed by same-age peers (e.g., "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood").

In addition, consistent with their early acquisition of speech and sophisticated language patterns, young gifted children tend to have a better understanding of various basic narrative techniques used by producers (e.g., camera angles and movement, background music) and what they contribute to the program than other children (Abelman, 1986, 1989). Because television is a primarily visual medium, an understanding of its visual "language" allows for better understanding of program content and minimizes misinterpretation of program information. This is particularly important when considering children's programming, which is not created from a child's perspective or with children's linguistic capabilities in mind. That is, producers of most children's fare:

- are not children;
- are not trained in child psychology or education;
- do not employ children as production consultants; and
- tend to piece together programs in a manner far different than would most children (Bryant, Zillman, & Brown, 1983) and through the use of very different narrative techniques (Noble, 1976).

*According to Joan Ganz-Cooney, the Creator of "Sesame Street,"*

*Even though it had not been tried before, there was nothing very radical, after all, about using various popular television techniques to try to teach preschoolers some basic cognitive skills.*

Basically, it is up to the child to learn the "language" employed by producers to become television literate. As can be seen in the following composite interview with seven year old children school-labeled as mentally retarded ("Mark"), learning disabled ("Linda"), academically average ("Ann") and intellectually gifted ("Greg"), highly divergent learning and linguistic capabilities result in varying levels of comprehension of television's storytelling devices:

**Zoom in to Closeup** (The camera brings the viewer into closer proximity with object of focus):

Mark: "The person is losing his face. He got nothing but eyes and his skin is covering the rest of his head."

Linda: "The guy's face is getting bigger and bigger and you think it's going to pop. His nose is as big as my dad's truck. Like I once saw a movie when a guy took some juice and grew bigger and bigger. He was real mad and stepped on houses. It was a good thing there were big trees and mountains, because he was running around naked. He didn't have no clothes on."

Ann: "It's like we're running to the guy, but we're really not. And it's like we're running super fast, but we really can't. It's all rather weird."

Greg: "We are getting closer to him. And it always makes me scared, because I know that something bad is going to happen when we get close. It's always bad. Going from close to far away usually means something good, like a happy ending when you see hillsides and rainbows."

**Background Music** (Music is introduced to complement the visual activity and/or set the mood for forthcoming action):

Mark: "The girl has a radio in her pocket."

Linda: "Someone's window is open and you can hear someone playing the piano or some instrument. It don't have nothing to do with what's going on, we just hear music."

Ann: "I never really noticed that. It seems to be saying the same thing as the pictures are saying. I don't know why they have to do that."

Greg: "It's TV's way of telling you something without using the words, because maybe the people in the show don't even know what's happening. The guys in the show can't hear it."

**Time Continuity** (The post-production manipulation of temporal sequencing to advance or delay action):

Mark: "I think maybe I don't watch carefully. He's swimming in a pool and then he's driving a car. He's all dry. I think that I miss something and I don't pay attention enough."

Linda: "He's magic."

Ann: "That's what TV does, that's just how they act. They're not real so they can jump around that way. It really doesn't mean anything more than 'now they're here' and 'now they're there'."

Greg: "If you watched them do everything that other people do the show would be on all day and it would be boring. They really do all those other things, but they don't show it. They take it out. Maybe they make another TV show with it."

**Fact 3: Commercial Advertising**

**Gifted children are particularly able to recognize the nature of problems, to select strategies that are appropriate for problem solving, and to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information (Glasser, 1985).**

**Question: Does this problem solving ability, along with their sensitivity to relationships, ability to piece together TV story lines, and comprehension of rudimentary production techniques enable young gifted children to better comprehend the selling strategies of commercial advertisements?**

The answer here is both "yes" and "no." Early school-age gifted children have been found to be more efficient at identifying and labeling various selling strategies in child-oriented advertising than other children, which makes these commercials less persuasive. However, that same ability becomes dysfunctional when applied to adult-oriented advertising. Here, gifted children are typically able to identify the selling strategy but, because of the level of sophistication of most of these ads, tend to believe that the claims are true, that the fabricated image is really a part of the consumable product, and that these commercials are less likely to be deceiving than those made for children (Sprafkin, Gadow, & Abelman, 1992).

*Les Brown, Media Critic for the New York Times, stated:*

*In day-to-day commerce, television is not so much interested in the business of communications as in the business of delivering people to advertisers. People are the merchandise, not the shows. The shows are merely the bait. The consumer, who the custodians of the medium are pledged to serve, is in fact served up.*

There is one facet of advertising that has become increasingly prevalent in the Saturday morning children's lineup and is extremely problematic for young gifted children: *program-length commercials*. These are hard-sell advertising campaigns cleverly camouflaged as palatable programming (Palmer, 1988). Most successful children's programs eventually spin-off into consumable items available at a store nearest you; program-length commercials feature consumable products starring in their own

television series. Here, barriers between ad and program have been so broken down that often little more than a formal distinction remains.

**Fact 4: Program References**

**Gifted children have a passion for learning and absorbing knowledge (Scruggs & Cohn, 1983; Sternberg & Davidson, 1985, 1986).**

**Question: What role does a readily available, easily accessible, and non-threatening source of social information such as television play in their socialization? Does it lead to an attraction to more sophisticated, adult-oriented programming for which they are not emotionally prepared?**

Gifted preschool children are more likely to watch educational programs (e.g., "Sesame Street," "Reading Rainbow," "Carmen San Diego") than cartoons and other children's programming, and are more likely to do so at an earlier age. They are also more likely to watch these programs with greater regularity and devotion than other children (Sprafkin, Gadow, & Abelman, 1992). However, as was previously noted, gifted children rapidly outgrow these programs and seek more interesting and appropriate replacements.

Largely because of the paucity of quality children's programs on the commercial and public networks and the still limited saturation of cable in this country, adult-oriented, primetime commercial television comedies, and action/adventure shows comprise the majority of television viewed during the elementary school years. During early adolescence, news and educational adult programming supplement adult entertainment fare.

**Question: Does this mean that gifted children are exposed to the excessive violence typically found in adult oriented programming?**

Research (Liebert & Sprafkin, 1988) suggests that youngsters most attracted and reactive to televised violence are:

1. low academic achievers;
2. naturally aggressive;
3. socially incompetent with peers and parents; and
4. consistently heavy television viewers.

Consequently, gifted children do not seem to qualify. Furthermore, 4th-6th grade gifted children are significantly more capable of identifying the prosocial motives behind aggressive behaviors depicted by "good guys" and develop alternative methods of conflict resolution when compared to nonlabeled, same age peers (Abelman & Sparks, 1985).

**Question: Does adult programming contain appropriate child role-models for gifted children?**

Television most effectively embodies and reinforces the dominant values in American society. What is it saying about the importance of being exceptionally bright, the perception of "high potential" children held by others, and the outcome of working hard in school? The answers can be found in Figure 2, which provides a summary of an extensive content-analysis of commercial network (ABC, NBC, CBS) primetime programming broadcast during the past decade.

| Year | New Shows | Kids Featured | Kids Starring | New Shows With Exceptional Children |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1980 | 14 | 3 (21%) | — | |
| 1981 | 23 | 4 (17%) | 1 (4%) | "Powers of Matthew Star" |
| 1982 | 28 | 8 (28%) | 1 (4%) | "Family Ties" |
| 1983 | 26 | 5 (20%) | 1 (4%) | |
| 1984 | 31 | 7 (23%) | 3 (10%) | |
| 1985 | 24 | 5 (20%) | 1 (4%) | "Growing Pains" |
| 1986 | 26 | 8 (30%) | 4 (15%) | "Head of the Class"<br>"Sidekick"<br>"Starman" |
| 1987 | 22 | 5 (23%) | 2 (10%) | |
| 1988 | 23 | 8 (33%) | 2 (8%) | "TV 101" |
| 1989 | 27 | 11 (40%) | 3 (12%) | "Life Goes On"<br>"Doogie Howser, MD" |
| 1990 | 31 | 12 (39%) | 3 (10%) | |

Figure 2. Children in primetime TV.

According to this analysis, there were 275 new programs on the air from 1980-1990. Approximately 27% of all these programs portrayed children in minor or supporting roles. Only 9% of all new programming during the past 10 years had one or more children in the starring or title role, despite the fact that over 17% of the nation's population is under 13 years of age.

*Peggy Charren, President of Action for Children's Television states:*

*Television, which has a unique capacity to affect and influence attitudes, is a school of sociology, instructing children about what they may expect from others and what goals to set for themselves. A litany of names from the new network children's season will give some idea of the creativity and humanity that fills the airwaves on Saturday morning: 'Godzilla and his nephew Godzooky,' 'Fangface,'*

*'Scoobydoo,' 'Yukk,' and 'Plasticman.' If this suggests to you that the special needs of children are not being served by commercial television, you are right.*

Of all the programs with children, only nine featured or starred a child that could be classified as non-average, or "exceptional" (3.2%), in light of the fact that most children on television are portrayed as extremely precocious. One exceptional child came from outer space ("Powers of Matthew Star"), another was the offspring of someone from outer space ("Starman"), a third was an exceptionally talented martial artist ("Sidekick"), and one was a child with Down's Syndrome ("Life Goes On"). The remaining five programs, 1.8% of all programming over the past 10 years, featured a child or teen that could be classified as intellectually gifted:

"Family Ties" (NBC, 1982-1991)

"Growing Pains" (ABC, 1985-1992)

"Head of the Class" (ABC, 1986-1991)

"TV 101" (CBS, 1988-1989)

"Doogie Howser, MD" (ABC, 1989- )

Note that the information provided above presents the percentage of programs that *starred* gifted children; the representation of gifted children in the overall child population on commercial, primetime television programming is significantly less. Thus, if television is considered a societal mirror, it has clearly failed to reflect the image of the gifted child.

**Fact 5: Perceived Reality**

**On the whole, there are few differences in self-esteem and self-concept when comparing gifted and average children (Hoge & Renzulli, 1991). However, exceptional children have been found to be especially sensitive to social cues (Freeman, 1985) and often have special needs with respect to emotional health, social competence (Schneider, 1987; Zaffran & Colangelo, 1979) and peer relations (Janos, Fung, & Robinson, 1985).**

**Question: Does this make them more vulnerable to TV portrayals of social relationships and interactions?**

Age-inappropriate content has been found to be somewhat problematic for young gifted children. Research suggests that they are likely to: (a) perceive many of the fictional characters found in more sophisticated adult-oriented programming as real (Abelman, 1991b); and (b) fail to accurately comprehend many of the more complex visual techniques employed as narrative devices in these programs (Abelman, 1990b,

1992), leading to misinterpretation of televised information. During early adolescence, a stage when children are arguably vulnerable to social influences (Colangelo & Kelly, 1983), gifted children tend to watch a great deal of television (see Figure 1), and may be especially attracted to fictional information about social interaction and behavioral roles.

*John Markus, Head Writer of "The Cosby Show" says:*

*We feel we should put words in children's mouths that children would say. Most TV shows have children running around the house as if they had cigars hanging out of their mouths. Children don't do that. Their ideas are different from adults' ideas. We work the hardest on the lines that the children say, because children are watching. We feel that responsibility every time we write.*

Although a child's perceived reality of television characters and situations changes over time, research evidence suggests that giftedness does not at all contribute to how quickly or thoroughly this is likely to occur. This is particularly true regarding teens' belief that television might be useful for them in constructing their own lives and interacting with others (Potter, 1992).

**Question: With this in mind, how are gifted teens portrayed on television? Is TV offering more positive or negative role models?**

Unfortunately, not only are there limited role models on television, as described earlier, but gifted teens are also poorly portrayed. A recent report by the National Commission on Working Women (Steenland, 1988), for example, examined more than 200 episodes of television programs specifically containing adolescent female characters. Its findings include:

- teenage girls' looks are portrayed as being more important than their brains—that is, appearance outweighs intelligence in terms of success with peers, problem-solving, and self-satisfaction;
- intelligent girls are sometimes depicted as social misfits, especially if they place brains over looks;
- intelligent girls are typically found attractive only by intelligent boys, who are themselves depicted as social misfits; and
- teenage girls in general are frequently portrayed as incapable of having intelligent conversations about academic interests or career goals.

**Fact 6: Parental Mediation**

**Gifted children have parents who are typically more conscious of their children's learning processes and factors that tend to advance or hinder intellectual and social progression (Gallagher, Kaplan, & Sato, 1983; Page, 1983).**

**Question: Do parents of gifted children have more rules or regulations for how much television is watched or what programs are to be viewed when compared with other parents?**

As with their nonlabeled counterparts, parents of exceptional children are infrequent mediators of television viewing (Abelman, 1987a, 1990a; Desmond, Singer, & Singer, 1990). As a matter of fact, there are no significant differences in the amount of rules or intervention exercised by parents of children identified as disabled {e.g., learning disabled (LD), emotionally disturbed (ED), and mentally retarded (MR)}, gifted, or nonlabeled. Based on self-reports of the frequency of fifteen separate forms of intervention by a nationwide sample of parents of eight year olds by Sprafkin, Gadow, & Abelman (1990), a low level of television viewing mediation exists between parents and child (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Percent of Direct Parental Mediation

| | **Child Classification** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **LD** | **ED** | **MR** | **Gifted** | **Non-labeled** |
| **Low** | 42 | 43 | 51 | 44 | 48 |
| **Moderate** | 31 | 29 | 38 | 33 | 40 |
| **High** | 27 | 28 | 12 | 23 | 12 |

*Robert Keeshan, "Captain Kangaroo," comments:*

*Television, used well, can provide enriching experiences for our young people, but we must use it with some discretion. . . it should not be filling the vacuum created by parents' neglect.*

Interestingly, when direct mediation of television viewing does occur, there are significant differences in the type of activities engaged by parents of children in the different educational categories (see Table 2). Parents of gifted children, for example, tend to be highly focused, purposeful, and evaluative in their mediation (Abelman, 1991a). They typically embark on more participatory forms of intervention, including explaining and discussing programming with their children and encouraging informed decision-making about program selection. In general, research suggests that parents of gifted children tend to allow their children more freedom to choose their own friends and make decisions, and encourage their creative interests and activities outside the home

(Clark, 1979; Colangelo & Dettman, 1983). This philosophy and practice apparently generalizes to the child's use of television.

Table 2.

Type of Direct Parental Mediation

| | Child Classification | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **LD** | **ED** | **MR** | **Gifted** | **Non-labeled** |
| **Restrictive** | | | | | |
| Forbid certain programs | | •• | • | | •• |
| Restrict viewing | | • | | | •• |
| Specify viewing time | •• | | | | • |
| Specify programs to watch | • | | | | |
| Switch channels on objectionable programs | | | | | • |
| **Evaluative** | | | | | |
| Explain program | | | | •• | |
| Explain advertising | | | | • | |
| Evaluate character role | | • | | •• | |
| Discuss character motivations | | | | •• | |
| Discuss plot/story line | | | | •• | |
| **Unfocused** | | | | | |
| Co-view with child | | | | | • |
| Encourage use of TV guide | | | | • | |
| Use TV as reward | •• | •• | •• | | |
| Withhold TV as punishment | •• | •• | •• | | |
| Talk about characters | • | • | | •• | |

| | |
|---|---|
| • | 35-50% of the sample |
| •• | 50-75% of the sample |

Clearly, the actual quantity and form of direct parental intervention is influenced by perceptions of television's possible effects. Parents' response to a series of statements that identified possible cognitive, affective, and behavioral level ramifications of TV viewing demonstrate highly divergent perceptions among parents of gifted, LD, ED, MR,

and nonlabeled children (Sprafkin, Gadow, & Abelman, 1992). Table 3 lists the most frequently identified positive and negative effects of television on children, as indicated by the primary caregiver (or both parents when available).

Parents of gifted children generally believe that television can have both a positive (e.g., increase verbal skill, increase creativity, increase knowledge of the world, increase curiosity) and negative (e.g., decrease in reading ability) cognitive-level effect on their children. Interestingly, the special affective and social needs of gifted children are also of great concern to parents (Elgersma, 1981; Vare, 1979) and may suggest to them a special vulnerability to attractive televised portrayals. This concern is evident in the research findings presented in Table 3. Parents perceive affective consequences of television viewing on their children, and these perceptions tend to be negative (e.g., decreased interest in reading, lower self-concept).

In general, it appears that the low level of mediation of gifted children's television viewing is more likely associated with their parents' belief that television can be a positive force in their children's lives rather than a neutral or negative force (Abelman, 1990a; Desmond, Singer, & Singer, 1990). The fact that parents of gifted children typically adopt an evaluative form of intervention when they do engage in direct mediation of television viewing also attests to their level of involvement and interest regarding their children's use of television. For information about specific in-home rules, regulations, guidelines, and parent/child activities see the sections entitled "Prescription for Parents" and "TV Activities" in this text.

**Fact 7: Government Intervention**

**Public Law 94-142, passed in 1975, guaranteed all exceptional children (except the gifted) free, appropriate, public education. Children with special disabilities have been extended telecommunications services according to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Brotman, 1990), but no such mandate has been made for children with special abilities.**

**Question: Is there any legislation that provides for the educational and telecommunications needs of gifted children?**

Historically, according to the Radio Act of 1927 and the Communications Act of 1934, broadcasters are required to serve in the public's best interest or run the risk of losing their operator's license. More recently, however, media critics and citizen groups have argued that children's best interests have rarely, if ever, been served. The federal government has offered few guidelines and even less regulation regarding limits on the amount of advertising that can appear on children's programs or that dictate a balance between entertainment and education. In the early 1980s, the FCC went so far as to eliminate all long-standing restrictions on broadcasters along these lines.

Table 3.

Perceived Effects of Television by Parents

| | Child Classification | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **LD** | **ED** | **MR** | **Gifted** | **Non-labeled** |
| **Cognitive** | | | | | |
| Decreases reading ability | •• | | | ••• | |
| Increases verbal ability | | | | • | |
| Decreases creativity | | | | • | |
| Increases knowledge and awareness of the world | | | | ••• | |
| Decreases attention span | •• | •• | | | |
| Increases creativity | | | | • | |
| **Affective** | | | | | |
| Decreases desire to learn | •• | | • | | |
| Increases stereotyping of roles/gender | | • | • | | |
| Decreases interest in reading | • | | | • | |
| Increases self-concept | | | | | |
| Decreases self-concept | • | | • | • | |
| **Behavioral** | | | | | |
| Increases desire for immediate gratification | • | | | | •• |
| Increases aggressive behavior | •• | ••• | •• | | •• |
| Decreases physical activity | | | • | | • |

| | |
|---|---|
| • | 35-50% of the sample |
| •• | 50-75% of the sample |
| ••• | 75-100% of the sample |

The newly passed Children's Television Act of 1990 (H.R. 1677) specifically reinforces the fact that an essential part of all broadcasters' obligations to the public is service to children. The Act is meant to:

1. place restrictions on the amount of advertising that can appear in children's shows on cable outlets and broadcast stations "to not more than 10.5 minutes per hour on weekends and not more than 12 minutes per hour on weekdays" (pp. 104 STAT. 996-997). Previously, there were no such limits;

2. require that each station "serve the specific educational and informational needs of children through programming. . . and special nonbroadcast efforts" (p. 104 STAT. 997). Failure to do so could result in the loss of its license to broadcast; and
3. create a national programming endowment of $2 million the first year ($4 million the second year) "to enhance the education of children through the creation and production of television programming specifically directed toward the development of fundamental intellectual skills" (p. 104 STAT. 998).

The ACT *does not:*

1. address the content or quality of children's programs;
2. control the existence of program-length commercials;
3. provide enough money in the endowment to make any great impact on programming or provide for long-term financing of educational programming; or
4. mandate how compliance to the law will be monitored by the FCC.

What are the possible implications for gifted children? The Children's Television Act of 1990 has the potential to curtail the dominance of mediocre and mundane programming on broadcast stations and offer greater diversity through cable outlets. Serving the "educational and informational needs of children" means serving *all children*. Creating programming "specifically directed toward the development of fundamental intellectual skills" also includes programming for children with *advanced intellectual skills*.

*Edward R. Murrow, CBS Correspondent, commented on television:*

*This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise, it is merely wires and lights in a box. There is a great, perhaps decisive battle to be fought, against ignorance, intolerance, and indifference. This weapon of television can be useful.*

The problem lies in the implementation of the Act and getting stations and cable outlets to realize that a viable, reliable, and interested segment of the young viewing community is high potential. Clearly, the audience that is the most outspoken, active, and reasonable is most likely to have its needs met by stations, under the umbrella of the Act. Considering that outspoken parents and teachers have been at the core of the introduction and advancement of special education in this country, getting the broadcaster's attention is not necessarily a problem.

**Fact 8: Instructional Opportunities**

**Gifted education is often seen as a collaboration of components that influence schooling, family, and community life (Goldberg, 1986). Curriculum for young gifted children should: (a) be based on interest and needs rather than on predetermined order or sequence of instruction; (b) access abstract and higher-level thinking processes, and (c) encourage creative and productive thinking (Karnes, Shwedel, & Kemp, 1985).**

**Question: Is there a place in gifted education for the incorporation of instructional television or use of broadcast television programming for instruction?**

Yes. There is little question that television is of interest to nearly all children and plays a significant role in their lives. More importantly, there exists much evidence that television viewing is a learned behavior that extends and reinforces basic comprehension skills (i.e., determining theme, utilizing context cues, forming sequence, and eliciting an awareness of cause and effect), and provides ample avenue for abstract and critical thinking.

There exists a growing number of "television literacy" or "critical viewing/thinking skills" curricula available on the market (Brown, 1991). Teachers in specialized and gifted education are starting to incorporate television literacy (the skillful collection, interpretation, testing, and application of television information) into their teaching agendas or are interfacing such programs with more traditional curriculum areas (i.e., language arts, social studies).

Numerous and diverse television literacy curricula and instructional materials have surfaced since the mid-1970s when the Ford Foundation sponsored the "Conference of Television and Children." During the keynote speech and the conference, it was suggested that "there is an important need for widened and improved instruction about the mass media in the public schools" (Ford Foundation, 1975, p. 31). Similarly, the first national conference to deal specifically with television literacy, "Children and Television: Implications for Educators," was held in 1981 and further instigated the development, implementation, and testing of in-school instructional intervention projects (Abelman, 1987b; Ploghoft & Anderson, 1981).

According to various media and social critics, media education deserves "the most urgent priority" for the following reasons:

- to learn about the ways in which our knowledge is mediated—that is, about how we come to know about the world, about other people, about ourselves, and about values (Alvarado, Gulch, & Wollen, 1987, p. 4);
- to generate an awareness of the increasing penetration of media into our central democratic processes (Masterman, 1985, p. 2); and

- to help young recipients of mass communication become active, free participants in the process rather than static, passive, unresponsive. and subservient to the images and values communicated in a one-way flow from media sources (Brown, 1991, p. 3).

*The former Chair of the Federal Communications Commission, Newton Minow, states:*

*. . . The first people who understood television, at least in the United States, were the advertising community. They grasped its significance immediately. The second group in the United States who figured it out were the politicians, because they saw the consequence the television would have in campaigning, in reaching the electorate. The last group which is finally awakening from its slumber are the educators, the teachers. They finally are beginning to realize that television is a monumental change in the way people think, in the way people spend their time.*

Numerous materials have been created that employ popular television programs for the purpose of encouraging children's cognitive, affective, and social development. The issue becomes one of choice: Which television literacy curricula are best suited for gifted education? For information about the selection and application of the most appropriate curriculum for the gifted classroom see the section entitled "Prescription for Teachers" in this text.

## Conclusions

Television is the great cultural denominator, the one environmental factor that all children have in common. As such, all parents and educators should consider television as a potentially positive and negative force in their children's lives. Although many caregivers have encountered the likes of Owen Meany and Matilda, these gifted children's absolute mastery of and limited use for television is largely fiction. Indeed, television is a highly prominent source of information and entertainment for most gifted children, particularly at times when they are arguably the most vulnerable and susceptible to often inaccurate, inappropriate, or highly persuasive televised portrayals.

It should also be noted that the catastrophic impact of television on youth, as depicted in the popular press, is equally fictitious. After all, being intellectually gifted places children in both advantageous and detrimental positions in terms of how TV is used, for what reasons, and to what effect. For some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For other children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. There is little doubt, however, that for nearly all children television has created a fundamental change in daily life.

*The following is an anonymous quote from a Midwesterner in a New York Times interview:*

*I remember we had a porch with those old creaking wicker swings and chairs and we used to sit out there at night like this and chat with passersby and see who was going where. But today you've got television. I tell you I'm terrible for it. I turn it on in the evening after a day's work with people and I can be relaxed and entertained. It's easier to watch TV.*

Although the natural inclination of caregivers might be to limit viewing time, to limit viewership to familiar and less sophisticated content, or to keep television out of the home and classroom altogether in order to control for possible harmful effects of televiewing, this would not necessarily be the most appropriate prescription for gifted children. It would also be controlling the possible benefits. Viewing gives young gifted children the opportunity to observe and familiarize themselves with advanced or abstract concepts and relationships that are normally learned at an older age; it allows older children to practice their perceptual and critical thinking abilities and puts their knowledge of the real and televised worlds to the test. Also, television is capable of presenting important information in genuinely interesting ways (see Appendix A: TV Activities for the Home and School)..

## Guidelines for Research-based Decision Making

The following guidelines have emerged from the above review of research addressing television and gifted children. Each guideline is followed by a brief discussion of the most pertinent research evidence.

**Guideline One: Young gifted children spend significantly more hours in front of the television set than their same-age peers, but viewing does not necessarily warrant parental concern or dramatic time reductions or limitations.**

Discussion: Sizable viewership of television programming at a very early age is reflective of gifted children's natural attraction to accessible and interesting sources of information. TV viewing during the preschool years is not a dysfunctional behavior unless it is (a) taking the place of, rather than complementing, other viable means of information (e.g., books), b) limiting interaction with parents and other children, and/or (c) resulting in long-term viewing habits of a similar nature. This is not usually the case and once children enter the formal school system, their overall TV viewing drops dramatically.

**Guideline Two: Parents are encouraged to make sure that the programming being watched matches their child's capability to follow story line and plot development and is sufficiently challenging.**

Discussion: Viewing gives gifted children an opportunity to observe and familiarize themselves with advanced or abstract concepts and relationships that are normally learned at a later age through other media (i.e., books). Similarly, viewing allows them to

practice their perceptual abilities, developing linguistic and critical thinking skills, and puts their knowledge of the real world to the test.

**Guideline Three: Younger children should avoid program-length commercials.**

Discussion: Young gifted children are efficient at identifying the selling strategies in child-oriented advertising in general, but programs featuring a consumable product are hard-sell advertising campaigns that break the formal distinction between ad and program.

**Guideline Four: Pay-TV (cable, video rentals) currently provides the most reliable supply of quality educational, informational, and entertaining children's programs.**

Discussion: Only 4% of all broadcast television is programming specifically created for children; less than 8% of all public television programming is education fare for school-age children. Gifted children of all ages are attracted to and benefit most from more complex forms of programming, which offer room for intellectual growth, a challenge in terms of story line or plot development, and more sophisticated and interesting characterizations.

**Guideline Five: Primetime commercial television offers inadequate and inappropriate role models for gifted children.**

Discussion: Only 9% of all the new programming during the past decade has had one or more children in the starring or title role, despite the fact that over 17% of the nation's population is under 13 years of age. Gifted children are also highly underrepresented and typically depicted as social misfits.

**Guideline Six: The most effective forms of parental mediation of television are purposeful program selection and co-viewing with a child.**

Discussion: Parents of gifted children are not actively involved in their children's TV viewing. There are few rules about what, when, and how much to watch, and gifted children often watch alone. Co-viewing and discussing television allows parents to get a better feel for the role TV plays in their child's life and shows children that TV can be a family activity.

**Guideline Seven: In accordance with the Children's Television Act of 1990, parents can and should become involved in influencing the quality and quantity of local children's programming.**

Discussion: The Act has the potential to curtail the dominance of mediocre and mundane programming on broadcast stations and offer greater diversity through cable outlets. The problem lies in the implementation of the Act and getting stations and cable outlets to realize that a viable, reliable, and interested segment of the young viewing community is intellectually gifted.

**Guideline Eight: Television in the classroom has a place in gifted education.**

Discussion: The use of instructional television programming or commercial programming for instructional purposes is capable of accessing abstract and higher-level thinking processes, encouraging creative, critical and productive thinking, and maintaining a high level of interest in gifted children.

## Research Summaries and Prescriptions for Parents

### Summary 1: How Much is Too Much?

Young gifted children spend significantly more hours in front of the television set than their same-age peers.

### Prescription

1. Sizable viewership of television programming at a very early age is reflective of gifted children's natural attraction to accessible and interesting sources of information. TV viewing during the preschool years is not a dysfunctional behavior and *does not warrant concern by parents,* unless it is:

    - taking the place of, rather than complementing, other viable means of information (e.g., books);
    - limiting interaction with parents and other children; and/or
    - resulting in long-term viewing habits of a similar nature.

    Evidence suggests that this is not usually the case and once children enter the formal school system, their overall TV viewing decreases and actually falls below that of their nongifted peers.
2. VCR and cable use has been found to replace rather than supplement gifted children's broadcast televiewing. If content via these technologies is preferred over broadcast television, there is no evidence that this will further increase total television usage.

### Summary 2: Dispelling the Myth of Passive Viewing

Much like reading, television viewing tends to be a cognitively active activity for young gifted children. Viewing gives children an opportunity to observe and familiarize themselves with advanced or abstract concepts and relationships that are normally learned at a later age through other media. Similarly, viewing allows them to practice their perceptual abilities, developing linguistic and critical thinking skills, and puts their knowledge of the real world to the test. . . if the programming is sufficiently challenging.

## Prescription

1. Gifted children tend to be self-motivated learners and enjoy learning tasks that are often unstructured and flexible. Television seems to fit the bill and should be considered a viable learning tool rather than as the detractor of attention, literacy and learning skills, according to the popular press.
2. Parents should make sure that the programming being watched matches their child's capability to follow story line and plot development and is sufficiently challenging.
3. Such programming may be hard to come by due to the limited supply of quality children's programs on commercial television and educational and informational offerings on public television. Parents might consider cable or other alternative means of programming.
4. Parents are encouraged to contribute to their local public television station, with the caveat that the money be earmarked for the purchase of educational fare for children. This programming exists, but public television stations must be told that there is an audience for this fare and must have the funds to obtain it. As a nation, we currently spend at a rate of about 12 cents per year per capita on children's educational programming on public television (a potentially powerful and far-reaching educational tool) while spending over $700 per capita for elementary and secondary school education.

## Summary 3: The ABCs of TV Literacy

Like reading, television viewing is a learned behavior and requires a level of "literacy" to comprehend content and get the most out of a program. Gifted children are quicker to pick up and master television's "language" (e.g., camera angles, sound effects, editing techniques) than their peers. Thus, they rapidly outgrow age-appropriate programming (which is usually limited in terms of production value). Although the content may be suitable, the visual and aural techniques used to relay information are no longer stimulating.

## Prescription

1. Avoid programs with similar plots, repeated or similar formats, and reruns.
2. Do not watch television haphazardly. Rather, purposefully select programming that has something to offer your child in terms of content and visual presentation. This may require a certain amount of previewing and co-viewing on the part of parents.

## Summary 4: Children for Sale

Approximately 20-25% of the messages on commercial television is advertising. School-age gifted children are more efficient at identifying and labeling various selling strategies in advertising, which makes child-oriented commercials less persuasive. Younger children are not as capable with regard to the selling intent of programs

featuring a consumable product, known as "program-length commercials" (i.e., "G.I. Joe"). Adult-oriented advertising is also problematic.

### Prescription

1. Commercial advertising in children's programs is typically more distracting and disruptive than persuasive. Devising a between-program-activity (see TV Activities for the Home and School. Suggestions in this text that employ critical thinking about the ad and/or reflection upon the program being viewed minimizes the distraction and can be educational.
2. Avoid program-length commercials for preschool children or use these programs as a means of understanding their commercial intent. Doing so has been found to NOT detract from the child's enjoyment from the program while facilitating their comprehension of advertising.

## Summary 5: Rules and Regulations

Parents of gifted children are not actively involved in their children's TV viewing. There are few rules about what, when, and how much to watch, and gifted children often watch alone. There are no significant differences in the amount of mediation and intervention exercised by parents of children identified as disabled, exceptionally abled, or nonlabeled, despite these children's varying abilities to learn from and be influenced by television.

### Prescription

1. Do not use television for punishment or reward. It places too much emphasis on the importance of the medium over other sources of information and entertainment.
2. There are no hard set, all purpose rules about how much television to watch. This depends on your child, his/her other activities, and the degree to which televiewing complements these activities.
3. The most effective form of mediation is purposeful program selection. Specific programs should be viewed, not just television. In addition, co-viewing and discussing television allows parents to get a better feel for the role TV plays in their child's life and shows children that TV can be a family activity.

## Summary 6: Getting One's Act Together

The Children's Television Act of 1990 has the potential to curtail the dominance of mediocre and mundane programming on broadcast stations and offer greater diversity through cable outlets. The problem lies in the implementation of the Act and getting stations and cable outlets to realize that a viable, reliable, and interested segment of the young viewing community is intellectually gifted.

## Prescription

Here are several specific ways for parents to remedy this problem, based on recommendations provided by Action for Children's Television (1990):

1. Demonstrate the Power in Numbers

- Coordinate meetings and letter-writing campaigns among parents, special educators, and school administrators in your community. Send these letters to the broadcast stations and cable outlets in your area.
- Send your letters to the local newspapers as well. A feature story by the papers could enhance your efforts and might increase the number of outspoken caregivers.
- Send your letters to local businesses and major organizations, and ask for their support of your effort.

2. Make Yourself Known

- Meet with the stations' general managers to identify what plans they have to broadcast programs specifically designed to meet the educational and instructional needs of high potential children.
- Offer to help build an audience for acceptable programming through school networks and organizational connections.
- If your school system is well endowed with broadcast facilities or writing labs, offer to assist in the creation of appropriate programming. This is a great opportunity to get gifted kids involved in the creative process and allows the station to document its efforts to "serve the specific educational and informational needs of children through programming. . . and special nonbroadcast efforts."

3. Monitor Ads/Programs as a Class Project or Home Activity

- Have your kids determine whether the station's schedule includes programs designed to meet their educational and information needs (shows dealing with news, history, biography, science, nature, etc.). Have them generate a list of possible topics for inclusion.
- Record some off-air children's programs and, with a stop watch, count the number of minutes per hour allotted to ads. Keep records and submit them to local station operators.
- Arrange to see the station's public files and information pertaining to children's programming. These materials should be available for public inspection.

4. Make Contact

- If the spirit and law of the Act is not being implemented, address a written complaint to the FCC (1919 M Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20554) and your U.S. representative or senator. Congress oversees the FCC.
- If local broadcasters and cable operators are complying with the Act, address a written compliment to the above agencies.

## Research Summary and Prescriptions for Teachers

### Summary

Television in the classroom has a place in gifted education. In particular, the use of instructional television programming or commercial programming for instructional purposes is capable of accessing abstract and higher-level thinking processes, encouraging creative, critical and productive thinking, and maintaining a high level of interest.

### Prescription for Selection

1. Consider the "Track Record"

   The majority of TV literacy curricula and their accompanying work materials are not empirically tested, or are untested in a range of educational environments and across a variety of student populations. This is especially so for materials produced outside of the academic community. As a result, the generalizability of these various materials are not well established.

   - Examine the "track record" of the available curricula and whether students like yours have been considered in the development of the work materials and curricular design.
   - If this information is not available in the promotional pamphlets or instructor's guides, contact the author or sponsoring agency.
   - If the curriculum has not been sufficiently tested, there is no guarantee of its worth as an instructional device for gifted children. In particular, it stands a good chance of being too boring, simplistic, or irrelevant.

   Furthermore, while many curricula focus on the cognitive components of learning from television, less attention has been paid to the role teachers can play in mediating or influencing the values or social information that children acquire from television. It has been noted that the interplay between emotional, social, and cognitive factors maximizes the learning potential of the highly gifted. Ideally, TV literacy curricula should be a unified learning situation, addressing children's cognitive abilities, social skills, and affective needs.

2. Consider the Media Experiences of Your Students

TV viewing is a social behavior that is well established before the child's initiation into formal education, even for those children whose entrance into the system has been accelerated. Consequently, even very young children know television extremely well, though not necessarily with the desired skills and critical perspective. Are the topics examined in the curriculum and the information it has to offer relevant to your students? Do they consider the range of media experience of your class?

- For children with limited TV experience, an examination of the process by which programs are made and the distinction between program types is pertinent.
- For more "media wise" or "television literate" children, curricula that explore the relationship between TV fantasy and reality or the social impact of television are effective.

How much television a child watches influences the rigidity of his or her perceptions and attitudes toward television. Although school-age gifted children typically watch less television than their nongifted counterparts, it still amounts to the most popular leisure time activity. Does the curriculum offer enough incentive and novel information for your students to alter their perceptions? A TV literacy curriculum often strives to provide children with a new frame of reference by which to appreciate and understand television. Does the curriculum of your choice correspond with the level of television sophistication of your students?

3. Consider the Visual Stimuli Employed in the Curriculum

Many TV literacy curricula offer visual stimuli as an instructional device. While an effective method, regular consumers of television are not as likely to transfer information from specially produced programs as they are from actual examples of commercial television fare. Actual as opposed to fabricated content:

1. better guarantees the relevancy of the instructional objectives;
2. generates a higher level of interest and participation among the children by providing familiar and highly attended programming; and
3. provides the teacher with a more direct measure of the children's application of the instruction to the program they actually watch at home, thus securing the overall utility of the activities.

Furthermore, because there is not evidence that verbally gifted students learn in a manner that differs qualitatively from more typical individuals, the employment of visual stimuli as a learning device is appropriate for all gifted students.

It should be noted that, with current copyright regulations and their enforcement, it has become increasingly difficult and costly for off-air programming to be used in nationally distributed curricula. As a result, fabricated content is slowly

becoming the norm in over-the-counter curricula. This can be remedied by taping your own programs off-air and weaving this information with that provided in the purchased work materials.

## Prescription for Application

1. Consider the Teacher's Role in the Curriculum

   The most effective curriculum takes advantage of a teacher's skills, style, and personal rapport with his or her students. The curriculum should be flexible to:

   1. allow for the variety of teachers using it;
   2. encourage student and student/teacher interactions to enhance curricular information; and
   3. allow for the wide variety of child/television relationships.

   A curriculum that allows for a certain degree of interpretation and transformation by the teachers (see Appendix A: TV Activities for the Home and School) will be more successful than a curriculum that is rigid and inflexible.

2. Consider the Parent's Role in the Curriculum

   As with any novel or highly interesting school activity, children are likely to bring home information from and about the TV literacy curriculum. There is evidence that social/school mediation may instigate or encourage parental interest in their children's TV viewing, as well as parental mediation or co-viewing within the family. Parents' active role in gifted education in general is well documented. It is quite possible, then, that the curriculum can impact on children directly, through the actual in-class activities, as well as indirectly, through whatever additional parent interest the project is able to incite.

   Curricula also range in their tolerance for parental input and in their requirements for take-home activities. The educator should determine the appropriate time for and amount of parental involvement. A truly legitimate child-oriented curriculum will provide an assortment of optional parent/child or parent/child/teacher activities to be used at the educator's discretion. Parents play an important role in gifted children's use, understanding, and interpretation of television information, but as seen in the previous chapter, may differ in their willingness to willfully participate in activities that involve television.

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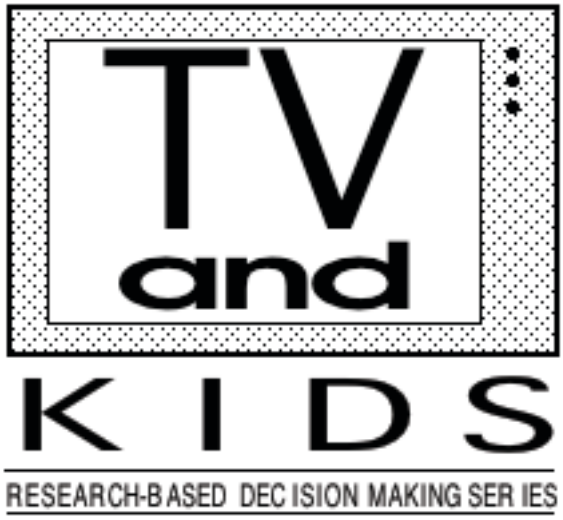
# Appendix A

## TV ACTIVITIES FOR THE HOME AND SCHOOL



# TV ACTIVITIES FOR THE HOME AND SCHOOL

The following materials offer a wide range of activities for the home and school that focus on television programming.

## Goals

The primary goal is to get children to purposefully think and talk about what, how much, and why they watch television. This, in turn, will get them to become more intelligent, discriminating, responsible TV consumers.

In addition, these activities are intended to make television a shared experience between family members and classmates. This allows parents and teachers to learn about the role television plays in their children's lives, and to share their insight and perspective.

## Format

For each activity there is:

- the level of the activity:

  **Levels Preschool - Grade 2**
  **Grades 3-5**
  **Grade 5+**

- a brief **OVERVIEW** of what the activity entails
- **INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES** to be met by this particular activity
- a list of **MATERIALS** required to conduct this activity
- the **TIME REQUIRED**
- a step-by-step series of **DIRECTIONS** which suggest the procedure to introduce, carry-out, and follow-through with the activity. Possible discussion topics and questions are often provided.

# INDEX OF ACTIVITIES

# TV DIARY

**Levels Preschool - Grade 5+**

## Overview

Children will be asked to keep a diary of their TV viewing for an entire week. The diary requires children to write down what they are watching at the time they are watching, note the reasons why they are watching particular programs, and list the people with whom they are watching.

## Purpose

This activity will allow children to tap into their own TV viewing by keeping track of what, when, why, and with whom they watch. It will identify whether they are watching programs for specific reasons or simply watching television because it is there and happens to be on.

## Instructional Objectives

1. Children will discover how much TV they watch in a week's time and compare that quantity with their other activities and those of other children.
2. Children will examine some of the most popular reasons for watching certain programs at certain times of the day. They will also realize whether they watch specific programs or simply watch television because it is easily accessible.
3. Children will apply their own TV viewing to such concepts as "genre" (see "Name That Genre" activity) and "pro-social and anti-social behavior" (see "Conflict/Plot/Theme" activity).

## Materials Needed

One diary per child. Each diary consists of seven time tables for TV viewing, one for each day of the week.

## Time Required

3-5 minutes for each entry made during viewing.

## Directions

1. Distribute the seven page diary. Tell the children that, for the next week, they will be asked to keep track of what TV shows they watch at home or at friends' houses, and why. Note that entries should be made during viewing and not at the end of the day.

2. Examine the diary at the end of the week. Identify patterns of television viewing habits (e.g., times allocated for viewing, preferred program types, or genre) and frequently stated reasons for viewing. If this is a class activity, compare diaries among classmates.
3. Discuss whether the most popular programs or program types contain large or small quantities of anti-social behavior (e.g., violence, verbal aggression, lying, cheating) and whether this is balanced with pro-social behavior (e.g., helping, altruism, sharing, cooperation). Determine if, overall, children's TV viewing is more anti-social or pro-social in its portrayals.

# TV DIARY

**SUNDAY MONDAY TUESDAY WEDNESDAY THURSDAY FRIDAY SATURDAY**

**Reason Key**

A = for information
B = for entertainment
C = for companionship
D = to forget my problems
E = there is nothing better to do
F = because my friends watch this show
G = there is nothing else to watch
H = because someone else is watching
I = other _____

| TIME | PROGRAM | REASONS | WHO IS WATCHING? |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3:00 pm | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 3:30 pm | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 4:00 pm | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 4:30 pm | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 5:00 pm | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 5:30 pm | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 6:00 pm | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 6:30 pm | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 7:00 pm | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 7:30 pm | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 8:00 pm | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 8:30 pm | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 9:00 pm | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 9:30 pm | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 10:00 pm | _____ | _____ | _____ |

# HOW DID THEY DO THAT I?

**Levels Preschool - Grade 2**

**Overview**

A TV program will be viewed in its entirety so that children can become familiar with the characters, story line, and events contributing to plot development. Afterward, the recorded program will be viewed again, but this time the program will be paused each time a production technique is used to influence the activity within the program. Each technique will be identified and labeled, and its contribution to the program will be discussed.

**Purpose**

This activity will help children understand the conventions of storytelling through the television medium.

**Instructional Objectives**

1. To introduce children to the various and diverse methods of storytelling through a visual medium.
2. To examine the potential and limitations of the television medium as a storyteller.
3. To teach children the visual "language" of television by isolating and labeling production techniques.
4. Children will discuss how production techniques add and detract from the actual story being told.

**Materials Needed**

A VCR and monitor, TV Techniques Checklist

**Time Required**

30 minutes for the initial viewing of the program and an additional 30 minutes for the re-examination

Note: The entire program does not have to be reviewed in order for the instructional objectives to be reached. The first 10-15 minutes of a program, or the last 10-15 minutes, typically incorporates most of the visual techniques employed throughout the program.

**Directions**

1. Tape a half hour segment of a favorite live-action television program.

2. Watch the program with your children or class. Do not offer any instruction other than to "watch the program and be prepared to discuss it afterward."
3. After the show has been viewed, distribute the TV Techniques Checklist, which defines and describes the most fundamental and frequently used visual narrative devices. Inform the children that the list identifies most of the production techniques used to help tell a story on TV. Discuss how, when reading a book, the author can offer different typeset or underlined passages or bold print to help the reader interpret the activity. Discuss how, when reading a book out loud, the reader can use his or her voice, facial expression, and gestures to accentuate the activity in the book. The Checklist represents the program producer's devices to help the viewer interpret the program's activities.
4. Go over each technique on the Checklist. Read aloud and discuss each definition.
5. Inform the children that the same program will be reviewed, but this time with an eye for the techniques being used to tell the story. Have the children say "stop the tape" each time any of the techniques is identified.
6. Review the program, pausing the tape each time a technique is evident. Discuss how that technique helps to tell the story.

# TV Techniques Checklist

## I. Conceptual Definition of a Zoom Shot:

Process of shooting a scene with a steady continuous motion, adjusting the lens from a wide angle to a telephoto (ZOOM IN) or vice versa (ZOOM OUT).

### Operational Definition of a Zoom Shot

**Zoom-in:**

Production technique which creates the effect upon the viewer of continuously moving in an uninterrupted manner from a position of greater distance, range, or scope to a central or primary object.

**Zoom-Out:**

Production technique which creates the effect upon the viewer of continuously moving in an uninterrupted manner from a central or primary object to a position of greater distance, range, or scope.

## II. Conceptual Definition of Camera Movements

Refers to the actual physical movement of the camera unit horizontally, vertically, forward, or backward so that the object of focus is given a different perspective.

### Operational Definitions of Camera Movements

**Pan:**

Technique identified by the horizontal pivoting of the camera either to the right or the left during shooting. The viewer perceives himself/herself as looking to the right or left.

**Tilt:**

Technique identified by the vertical pivoting of the camera either up or down during shooting. The viewer perceives himself as looking up or down.

T**racking:**

Technique identified and measured by the amount of movement experienced by the camera unit to the right, left, forward, or backward. Viewer perceives himself/herself as physically moving his/her entire body toward a different location to the right, left, forward, or backward.

## III. Conceptual Definition of a Fade

A gradual increase or decrease of video signal strength

**Operational Definitions of Various types of Fades**

**Fade-in (from black):**

The televised picture of viewer's perceived image is gradually brought into view from a black background.

**Fade-Out (to black):**

The televised picture or viewer's perceived image gradually diminishes to black.

**Fade-In From White or Another Picture Image:**

The televised picture or viewer's perceived image is gradually brought into view from a white background or another picture/image.

**Fade-Out to White or Another Picture/Image:**

The televised picture or viewer's perceived image gradually diminishes to white or another picture/image.

## IV. Conceptual Definition of Special Effect:

Treats a shot with electronic and mechanical techniques or devises employed to produce visual illusions for video production.

**Operational Definitions of Basic Visual Special Effects**

**Split-Screen:**

Technique identified by the presence of two or more individual scenes appearing on the screen at the same time. The viewer identifies two or more distinct sections on the screen which are independent and often unrelated to one another.

**Wipe:**

Technique identified when one scene appears to push another off the screen horizontally, vertically, or diagonally.

**Dissolve:**

Technique identified when one video source fades out while another fades in. The image of the two sources overlap for a period during this simultaneous process, which distinguishes this technique from a fade.

**Superimposition:**

Process of combining separate shots into one shot. This technique can be identified when one shot is placed behind or over another shot. It may also serve to further highlight a primary subject.

**Insert:**

Process of submitting new material onto old previously recorded video material without disturbing the original before or after treatment.

**Float:**

Technique identified by words or images on the screen which appear to move from the right to the left, up or down, or diagonally.

**Wide-Angle Lens:**

Use of this lens creates a visual effect which is identified by a short focal length and an extended horizontal field of view. The viewer's scope or range of vision encompasses and focuses on peripheral vision vs. the area central in the scope of vision.

## V. Conceptual Definition or a Shot:

A shot refers to the individual scene filmed or the unit of analysis. There are two major descriptions of a shot: type and proximity.

**Conceptual Definition of Proximity:**

Technique which enables the viewer to perceive himself/herself as selecting one particular aspect or aspects of a potentially larger image or picture for greater scrutiny.

**Operational Definitions of Shots Identified by the Proximity to the Subject and the Type of Shot or Picture Composition**

**Tight Shot:**

Camera shot in which the subject of the focus occupies the majority of the screen with almost no background scene area.

**Close-Up:**

Camera shot with little visible background in which the main subject of a scene is shown to be larger on the screen than a previous shot.

**Long Shot:**

Camera shot taken at a distance which includes a great deal of background scene area. The scene area occupies a greater amount of space than the subject of focus.

**Medium Shot:**

Any camera in which the overall amount of scene space is equally divided between the object of focus and the background area.

**Head Shot:**

Visual production technique which limits the viewer's field of vision from the top of the subject's head to the top of the shoulders.

**Bust Shot:**

Area of focus is located from the top of the subject's shoulders to mid-torso or waist; area of focus could also be the length of the subject's upper body to the mid-torso or waist.

**Waist Shot:**

The area of focus is located between the subject's waist and knees; area of focus could also include the length of the subject's upper body to the top of the subject's knees.

**Knee Shot:**

The area of focus is between the subject's knees and feet; area of focus could be the length of the subject's upper body to the feet.

**Full Shot:**

The area of focus includes the entire length of the subject's body.

# HOW DID THEY DO THAT II?

**Levels Grades 3-5**

## Overview

This is basically the same activity as HOW DID THEY DO THAT I?, but with an added ingredient for older children. This time, each of the production techniques on the Checklist is classified as being either "Telegenic" (reflective of our own interaction with the real world, such as camera movement and zooming in and out) or "Telegeneric" (unique to television and unlike our own real world experience, such as editing and special effects). This allows children to better understand the repertoire of storytelling devices available to the makers of television programming.

## Purpose

This activity will help children understand the conventions of storytelling unique to the television medium.

## Instructional Objectives

1. Same as HOW DID THEY DO THAT I?
2. To identify how television programs are both a reflection of reality and the invention of technology.

## Materials Needed

Same as HOW DID THEY DO THAT I?

## Time Required

Same as HOW DID THEY DO THAT I?

## Directions

1-4. Same as HOW DID THEY DO THAT I?
5. Define and discuss "Telegenic" and "Telegeneric."
6. Inform the children that the same program will be reviewed, but this time with an eye for the techniques being used to tell the story. Have the children say "stop the tape" each time any of the techniques is identified.
7. Review the program, pausing the tape each time a technique is evident. Discuss how that technique helps to tell the story. Classify the techniques as either telegenic or telegeneric. Discuss why that particular type of technique was being employed and what it contributes to the story.

# HOW DID THEY DO THAT III?

**Levels Grade 5+**

**Overview**

This is basically the same activity as HOW DID THEY DO THAT II?, but with an added level of sophistication and creativity for older children. This time, after the viewing and reviewing process is completed, children will be read a short story and asked to translate the story into a "made for TV" format by adding telegenic and telegeneric devices where they deem appropriate. This allows children to put into practice the information about production techniques learned in the previous activity.

**Purpose**

This activity will help children understand the conventions of storytelling through the television medium.

**Instructional Objectives**

1. Same as HOW DID THEY DO THAT II?

**Materials Needed**

Same as HOW DID THEY DO THAT II?

**Time Required**

60-90 minutes

**Directions**

1-7. Same as HOW DID THEY DO THAT II?
8. Read a short story or a poem of your choice, as long as it is full of mental imagery and vivid description. Inform the children that they are to translate this story or poem to television, incorporating any or all of the visual techniques identified in the previous activity.
9. Go over this new version or, if in a classroom setting, have several students read their version complete with techniques. Discuss whether the new version is enhanced or diminished by these techniques. Identify one or more made-for-TV movies or miniseries that the children may have watched that were adaptations of a book or story. Discuss whether this version was better or worse than the original.

# THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

**Levels Grade 5+**

**Overview**

This activity is a variation on the theme provided in HOW DID THEY DO THAT III? It examines a story as told through the original book and through an existing adaptation for film or television. This activity identifies the conventions employed by each medium, as a result of the natural limitations and capabilities of each medium.

**Purpose**

To identify differences in storytelling conveyed through various media and the creative power and problems of the author (for books) and producers (for film and television).

**Instructional Objectives**

1. To enhance critical thinking skills as they apply to interpreting written and visual text.
2. To recognize creativity and the freedom of artistic interpretation and expression in diverse media.

**Materials Needed**

A book and its movie and/or television adaptation (e.g., "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," "Tom Sawyer," "A Tale of Two Cities", "The Three Musketeers," "Cyrano de Bergerac")

A VCR and/or film projector

**Time Required**

Time is dependent on the length of the story, movie, or TV version of the movie.

**Directions**

1. Read a favorite book or story, making certain that a film or television version of the story exists.
2. Rent the film or obtain the television version of the story.
3. View the film or program with your children. Discuss the differences and similarities across media and the reasons for their existence.
4. Discuss which version was "better" and why? Discuss if the mass mediated version of the story was true to the original.

# TIME TRAVELING

**Levels Grades 3-5+**

## Overview

This activity examines how much or how little activity is compressed into a 30-minute or 60-minute program format. Television's ability to manipulate "real time" so that events and activities are either elongated ("time-lags") or abbreviated ("time-leaps") is examined as a storytelling device.

## Purpose

The purpose of this activity is to alert children to one aspect of television fantasy that is often overlooked—the manipulation of time. In some programs, several days or months may pass within a 30-minute drama or it may take the entire 60 minutes of an action/adventure program for the bomb with a 10-minute timer to go off. This activity accounts for that manipulated time and applies it to real world activity.

## Instructional Objectives

1. Increase awareness of television's narrative devices
2. Encourage creativity and interpretive skills
3. Examine the impact of advertising placement on story line.

## Materials Needed

A stop watch, pencil, and paper

## Time Required

60 minutes when examining a 30-minute program;

90 minutes when examining a 60-minute program.

## Directions

1. Discuss how 30-minute programs rarely show 30 minutes in the life of the characters. Sometimes, if the story calls for it, time can be delayed or prolonged. Have the children identify possible reasons for why time would be made to move more slowly in a program than in reality (i.e., to build the drama) or more quickly (i.e., to keep the plot moving, to remove unnecessary activity such as driving from one place to another).
2. Watch a favorite 30- or 60-minute program. Have children identify the places in the program when time is manipulated— that is, time progresses faster or slower than normal. This includes interruptions for

advertisements and aspects of the story line that freeze or leap forward in time.
Example of Freeze: Bob and Judy are in the kitchen talking about their friend Frank, who is in jail. The program then cuts to Frank in jail, writing a letter to the warden. After about 10 minutes of Frank, we then go back to Bob and Judy who continue with their conversation as if we never left them.

Example of Leap: The warden is awakened at home by a phone call informing him that Frank has escaped. In the very next moment, we see the warden fully dressed and at the prison.

3. With the stop watch, measure the total amount of time lost from commercial breaks (typically 12 minutes for a 60-minute program) and note what is happening in the story when the breaks occur. Discuss what could have happened in the story during that time if the breaks did not occur.
4. On a pad of paper, list the probable amount of time that passed when a "time-leap" occurs. Discuss what activity would have happened in real life during that "leap."

# A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

**Levels Preschool - Grade 5+**

## Overview

This activity examines television advertising and its use of visual techniques to attract the viewer, to create images to be associated with the product, and to make the product look attractive.

## Purpose

To recognize the prevalence, power and impact of television's visual images, and the conventions of advertising.

## Instructional Objectives

1. Enhance critical viewing skills as they apply to television advertising.
2. To understand the persuasive strategies and techniques used in advertising.

## Materials Needed

If an in-home activity, your television set.

If a classroom activity, a VCR, monitor, and prerecorded selection of advertisements. These can also be obtained at many libraries in the form of "The Clio Awards" (for best ads).

## Time Required

This depends on the number of advertisements examined. Most ads are 30-60 seconds each. Discussion time is approximately 5 minutes per ad.

## Directions

1. Inform the children that they are about to view a commercial with the sound turned off. They are to (a) guess what is being sold, (b) identify some of the ways the product is being portrayed as attractive or interesting, and (c) identify the target audience for that commercial.
2. View the advertisement. Afterward, have the children guess the product being sold. Discuss how they know this and how much of the commercial actually focused on or visually presented the product.
3. Identify the target audience. In addition to the nature of the product itself (i.e., cars for adults), discuss how the "visual clues" or narrative devices provided in the commercial suggest the audience. Have the children discuss alternative "clues" for different audiences.

# NAME THAT GENRE

**Levels Grades 3-5**

## Overview

Children classify programs into distinctive program types, or genre (comedies, drama, game shows, sports, soap operas, action/adventure, talk shows, news). The elements which comprise each type of program will be examined. Children will look through their diaries (from an earlier activity) and identify their most preferred program type.

## Purpose

To differentiate between types of programs by their defining characteristics. This includes format specifications, visual techniques, locations, and character types.

## Instructional Objectives

1. To identify and distinguish between program types and realize that television is comprised of very different but classifiable programs.
2. To examine which type of program(s) children most prefer and why.

## Materials Needed

One 2-page Program Type Worksheet per child.

## Time Required

30 minutes

## Directions

1. Note that TV programs are comprised many different elements—parts that make up the whole. Suggest to the children that you are going to name some elements of different objects. Have them raise their hand if they can tell what object you are describing.
2. Suggest that, just as there are many elements that represent certain objects, there are many elements to most TV programs.
3. Distribute the TV Program Type Worksheet. Go over the directions with the children. If you wish, do the first example with the children, thus guaranteeing that the directions are understood. Have the children complete the worksheet.
4. After the worksheet is completed, discuss the similarities and differences between program types. Have the children identify from their diaries some examples of each genre. Have them identify their most preferred

genre based on what they watched during one representative day of the week of the diary activity.

# TV Program Type Worksheet

**DIRECTIONS**

1. Work on one page at a time.
2. Read each Element List and look at each picture carefully.
3. Decide what type of TV program is being described. It will be one of the program types listed at the bottom of the page.
4. Next to "TYPE" write in the name of the type of TV program that goes with the element list and picture.
5. Next to "EXAMPLE" give an example of that type of show– one that you watch.

**Element List**

a host; prizes; people do not play characters, they play themselves; some people win and some lose; lots of lights

**TYPE** _____

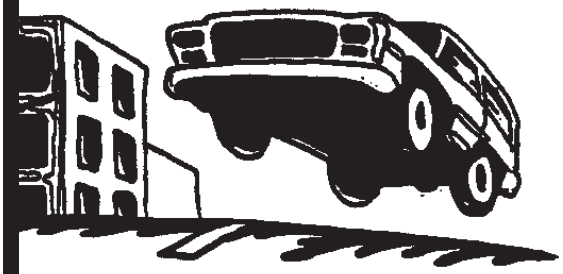
**EXAMPLE** _____

**Element List**

same characters in every show; story is serious; problems may not get solved by the end of the show, but they usually do; emotional

**TYPE** _____

**EXAMPLE** _____



**Element List**

on TV every weekday; same people on the show everyday; stories don't end but continue to the next day's show; takes place in hospitals or homes

**TYPE** _____

**EXAMPLE** _____

**Element List**

one or more people talk directly to you; maps, charts and graphs; pictures of people or important things that happened that day

**TYPE** _____

**EXAMPLE** _____

**TV PROGRAM LIST**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| DRAMA | ACTION/ADVENTURE | GAME SHOWS |
| NEWS | SOAP | OPERAS |
| TALK SHOWS | SPORTS | COMEDY |

# TV Program Type Worksheet

**Element List**

same characters in every show; happy ending; laughter; takes place in the same location; one character gets into funny situation and the other characters help him or her out of it

**TYPE** _____

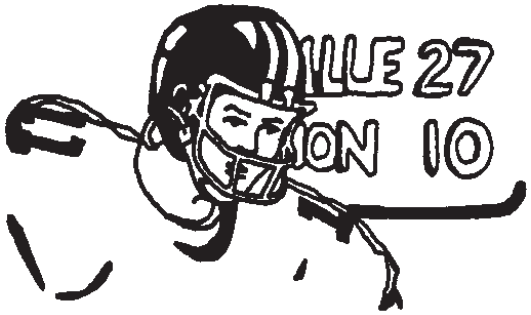
**EXAMPLE** _____

**Element List**

same characters in every show; story is serious; problems may not get solved by the end of the show, but they usually do; emotional

**TYPE** _____

**EXAMPLE** _____

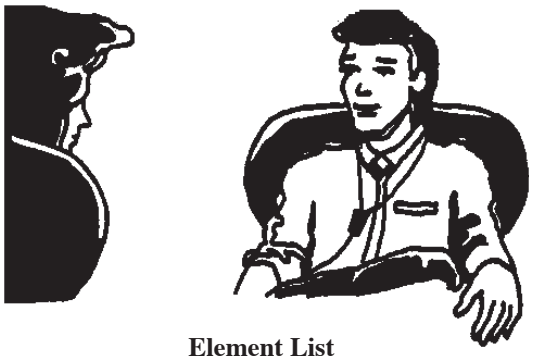



**Element List**

people do not play characters; some people win and some lose; teams; rules; a score; instant replays; announcers

**TYPE** _____

**EXAMPLE** _____



**Element List**

actors and actresses, but not playing characters; host; same location each show; chairs or couch; famous people

**TYPE** _____

**EXAMPLE** _____

**TV PROGRAM LIST**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| DRAMA | ACTION/ADVENTURE | GAME SHOWS |
| NEWS | SOAP | OPERAS |
| TALK SHOWS | SPORTS | COMEDY |

# CONFLICT/PLOT/THEME

**Levels Grades 3-5+**

**Overview**

Children learn about the function of conflict, plot, and, theme and in TV programs. They will discover that different types of programs (identified in the previous activity) contain different types of plots, themes, and forms of conflict.

**Purpose**

To differentiate between types of programs by their defining characteristics, including how events unfold, the nature of these events, and the meaning those events relay.

**Instructional Objectives**

1. To identify and distinguish between program types and realize that television is comprised of very different but classifiable programs.
2. To realize that all programs possess a basic skeletal structure comprised of a plot and theme and incorporate some form of conflict.
3. To identify the type of plots and themes most preferred by children.

**Materials Needed**

One Conflict/Plot/Theme Worksheet per child.

One Flow Chart

**Time Required**

30 minutes

**Directions**

1. Distribute the Conflict/Plot/Theme Worksheet. Note how different types of programs have different types of conflicts, plots, and themes. Ask the children to define conflict or read the definition as presented on the worksheet.
2. Have the children fill out the "Conflict" section of the worksheet with reference to a favorite program or a show they may have watched last night.
3. Ask the children to define plot or read the definition as presented on the worksheet, and fill out the "Plot" section of the worksheet with reference to a favorite program or a show they may have watched last night.

4. Repeat the procedure with "Theme."
5. As an in-home activity, have the children watch a television program and, with the aid of the Flow Chart, dissect the program in terms of its conflict, plot, and theme. If desired, have the children create a "new" program by identifying a unique conflict, plot, and theme. Discuss whether the "new" program resembles any existing TV show.

# CONFLICT/PLOT/THEME WORKSHEET

==========

**Conflict** — A conflict is a clash between people, opinions, ideas, or feelings. It can be a physical fight, an argument, or a problem that someone has to solve on his/her own.

The following questions will help you identify the conflicts in television programs:

* Who in the program is having a problem or trying to solve a problem?
* Is it a physical clash, like wrestling?
* Is it a clash of opinions, with a lot of arguing?
* Is it a moral clash, with someone "wrestling" with his/her own thoughts or feelings?

A. Write the name of the program you liked the best last night:

_____

B. Write the names of those characters who clashed with someone or something during that program:

_____ _____

_____ _____

C. What was the clash about? _____

D. What type of conflict/clash was it?

Problem ___

Physical ___

Opinions ___

Moral ___

==========

# CONFLICT/PLOT/THEME WORKSHEET *(continued)*

==========

**Plot** — The plot is the series of events in the order that they happen in the program.

The following questions will help you identify the plots in TV programs:

* What were the five or six main things that happened in the program?
* What is the order that those events unfolded?
* What is the purpose of each event?
* Does each event have something to do with the event that happened before it?
* How does each event relate to the main conflict//clash?

A. Write one or two sentences which describe the plot (series of events) of the program you liked best last night.

_____

_____

_____

B. List the events in the program in the order that they occurred:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

==========

## CONFLICT/PLOT/THEME WORKSHEET *(continued)*

==========

**Theme** — The theme is the message of the program.

The following questions will help you identify the themes in TV programs:

* What is the underlying meaning of the story?
* Does it have an overall message about life?
* Does it have a message about the way people should act?
* Do you agree with the theme?

A. What is the main theme of the program you liked best last night?

_____

_____

B. Write the theme of the show from your favorite comedy:

_____

_____

C. Write the theme of the show from your favorite action/adventure show:

_____

_____

D. Choose either of the themes above and write a short paragraph about how it relates to your life:

_____

_____

_____

==========

# Flow Chart

Name of TV Show: _____

Type of Program: _____

Main Characters:

Type of Conflict(s):

| Motive Behind Action: | Consequence of Action: |
|---|---|

What were the Main Events in the Show?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

What was the Message of the Show?

Was the Program a Pro-social or Anti-social Program?

# IF I COULD WALK IN THEIR SHOES

**Levels Grades 3-5+**

## Overview

This activity asks children to take their favorite characters out of their program and into other programs or real world situations.

## Purpose

The purpose of this activity is to explore the nature and limitations of popular television characters. Children will examine how characters are defined by their particular program and program type (genre), and compare with their real world counterparts.

## Instructional Objectives

1. To understand how genre influences what a character can and cannot do within a particular program type.
2. To reinforce accurate perceptions of reality of TV characters and realign inaccurate perceptions.
3. To apply creative and critical thinking to television programming.

## Materials Needed

None

## Time Required

30 minutes

## Directions

1. Have children identify several favorite television programs and their genre. For each program, identify the main or most popular character.
2. For each character, have children provide a description of each character's: (a) job or primary activity within the program, (b) abilities/talents and disabilities, (c) personality traits, (d) interests and/or hobbies, (e) ways of handling personal crisis, and (f) most admirable qualities.
3. Have children take a favorite television character and place him/her in a different program on the list.
4. Discuss how this character would interact with the characters in the new program. Does this character "fit in" with the others? Does this new program create situations or introduce the character to types of people that

s/he would not normally encounter in the original program? Would this character survive? Thrive?

4. Place this same character in the real world equivalent of his/her job or major function in the program (i.e., Doogie Howser as a doctor in a real hospital). Would this character "fit in" with real world counterparts? Would s/he survive? Thrive?
5. Encourage children to either write an essay about the differences in how their favorite character would act in these new situations or write an outline for a program describing this new scenario.

# ADVERTISING APPEALS

**Levels Preschool - Grade 5+**

## Overview

Existing and fabricated products will be used to inspire the creation of television commercials by the children. Once created, commercials will be acted out. Afterward, the types of appeals used to persuade the consumer to buy the product will be analyzed and techniques used to make the product more attractive will be discussed.

## Purpose

The purpose of this activity is to allow children the opportunity to utilize their own persuasive skills while recognizing the persuasive strategies employed by professional advertisers.

## Instructional Objectives

1. Encourage children to use their creative and persuasive skills to invent a television commercial for a specific audience.
2. Increase children's awareness of production techniques, persuasive appeals, and audience analysis.
3. Stimulate children to articulate their ideas and imaginations.

## Materials Needed

None

## Time Required

45-60 minutes

## Directions

1. Show children a product that could be sold on television. This product can be any container or wrapper with the original label or brand name hidden or discarded.
2. Have the children create their own television commercials to sell this product to: (a) other kids their same age, (b) older kids, (c) grandparents.
3. Have the children either discuss or act out their commercials.
4. Discuss how the commercials were modified based on the target audience. Introduce a new and different product. Discuss how this new product could be sold to the same audiences using the same appeals as in the other commercials.

# MTV AND ME

**Levels Grades 3-5+**

## Overview

Children will make their own music video. By listening to a song, children are asked to create the storyboard for a video that best reflects the music. If there exists an actual video, it will be viewed and comparisons will be made between the professional and amateur versions.

## Purpose

To allow children the opportunity to express their own creativity and gain an understanding of the complexity of putting together a music video or any artistic form of video presentation.

## Instructional Objectives

1. Encourage children to use their listening and interpretive skills.
2. Introduce children to and help them realize the unique format of the music video.
3. Express artistic and creative control by incorporating music with the visual arts.

## Materials Needed

A VCR

Paper for a storyboard

## Time Required

Activity can be done in two 30-minute stages (with an optional third stage)

## Directions

(Stage 1)

1. Video record a popular song on MTV or VH1. Attempt to record a song that has not been seen.
2. Have children listen to the music video without the visual display. Provide the lyrics if desired.
3. Children are to create their own, individual, storyboards for a music video to accompany the song. They are to use their imaginations and knowledge of the visual techniques available to television.

(Stage 2)

4. Play the artist's music video version of the song. Discuss the differences between the professional and amateur versions.

   Which techniques seem to work the best in terms of representing the music? Can television accurately reflect the children's visions for the song?

(Optional Stage 3)

5. Play an old(er) song that has no video. Repeat Stage 1 directions

# TV NEWS v. PRINT NEWS

**Levels Grades 3-5+**

## Overview

Children will compare the same news stories as presented in a national television newscast, national news magazine, and local newspaper. Differences and similarities in presentation will be discussed and an awareness of the influence of the medium on setting the national news agenda will be generated.

## Purpose

The purpose of this activity is to allow children the opportunity to realize how different mass media influence what news information and the manner by which news information is presented to its audience.

## Instructional Objectives

1. Increase children's awareness of the differences and similarities of news presentation through the television and print media.
2. Enhance critical viewing skills through the careful review and critique of media news.
3. Introduce children to a variety of news sources.
4. Understand the different quantity and quality of information available through different mass media.

## Materials Needed

A recording of last evening's network evening news (any or all networks)

The local morning newspaper

A national news magazine

## Time Required

60 minutes

## Directions

1. Ideally, this activity should be conducted on a date when the taping of the TV news program, the local morning paper, and the production of a weekly news magazine coincide. This way, much of the information in each of the media are similar.

2. Review the television news program with the children, listing the topic of each story, the amount of time it took to tell the story, and whether there was a visual presentation to accompany the verbal information.
3. Have the children examine the news magazine and see if any of the same stories were given coverage. If so, how many inches of coverage was the story afforded? Was there a picture? Do the same with the local newspaper.
4. Discuss the differences and similarities of coverage: (a) Which medium gave a greater proportion of its space/time to the particular story?, (b) Was one medium more informative or entertaining? and, (c) Did one medium offer more commentary than another?
5. Discuss how each of the following is likely to impact on the quality and quantity of news in each medium: (a) budget, (b) time, or (c) technology.

# REALITY v. TECHNOLOGY

**Levels Preschool - Grade 5+**

## Overview

Children will be provided with an opportunity to experience a real world event and compare it with television's coverage of the same event. This activity is dependent on the availability of a local sporting event and local or national television coverage.

## Purpose

To emphasize the difference between reality and television's coverage of reality by offering first hand experience of both.

## Instructional Objectives

1. Enhance critical viewing of televised versions of real life events.
2. Understand and appreciate the unique form, substance, and structure of a televised sporting event.

## Time Required

This varies, according to the actual time of the sporting event.

## Materials Needed

A real sporting event

Either a portable television or radio set at the sporting event, or a VCR recording of the event at home.

## Directions

1. Take the children to a sporting event that will be covered by the local or national radio and/or television.
2. If a portable radio and/or television set is available, bring it to the sporting event. While watching the event, compare live experience with the radio and/or television's coverage of the event. How are they different? How are they similar? In what way does radio and/or television enhance the action? What is missing from the mediated experience?
3. Watch the recorded event. Follow the path of discussion laid out in Direction 2.

# Research-Based Decision Making Series

The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented
The University of Connecticut
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Storrs, CT 06269-2007



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NRC G/T

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