

Adult Content in Children's Programming
Is it too Much?
Group 16

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Prime-Time Cartoons and the Ratings System

By Brian Watts

Almost fifteen years ago, Matt Groening created *The Simpsons*, a cartoon that has not only become the longest-running sitcom of all time, but also the first and most widely successful prime-time cartoon in history. Not only that, thanks to Groening's brilliant creation, numerous other cartoons have been able to nudge their way into prime-time television viewing slots. These shows include the recently cancelled *Futurama* and *The Family Guy* as well as still running *King of the Hill*. On the edgier side, Comedy Central's smash-hit *South Park* and the more recent *Kid Notorious* have captivated viewers with little more than their raucous comedy and shock value.

While these cartoons often air later in the evening, it can not be denied that their styles will lure in younger viewers, considering that they have access to a television at the time the show airs, which

most children do. The enormous popularity of *The Simpsons*, which has been called "FOX network's most successful series to date" definitely shows that people are watching (Kytasaari, 2003). On September 17th, 1995, over twelve million television sets were tuned in for *The Simpsons'* season opener, and the numbers have remained steady in the years following (Stepanas 1997). However, the problem is that many of the people watching shows such as *The Simpsons* are the very people that should not be.

The problem, of course, lies not within the shows themselves, though. Freedom of speech and expression should allow the artists and writers of these shows to include whatever content they see fit, so long as it gets the approval of the network censors. Instead, it lies with parental supervision. While it is unlikely that parents will be unable to control the content that their children watch all of the time, they do have to take moderate responsibility for what their children see and

what they do not see. Shows like *The Family Guy*, which was, during its run on FOX, arguably one of the worst cartoons where adult content is concerned, are not meant to be viewed by children and, therefore, should not be viewed by children.

This is where the more recent television ratings system, which "was first put into use in January 1997 by cable and broadcast television," comes into play (Craig, 1997). This system was established by the United States Federal Communications Commission for a reason, and that reason should not be ignored by parents. Shows like *The Family Guy* carry a TV-14 rating, which translates to "parents strongly cautioned" (Craig, 1997). *South Park*, on the other hand, has been given a very appropriate TV-M (Mature) rating, meaning that it contains extremely lewd dialogue or images that may offend certain people. If more parents paid attention to these ratings, which appear in the upper left hand corner of the TV during

the beginning of a show, children accessing these mature cartoons would not be so much of a problem.

Teaching Kids Too Soon

By: Amanda Watts

Sexual references and adult content are everywhere in our world of children's programming. This is ridiculous children at very young ages do not need to know about sex or need to hear sexual talk. There have been a few stations that are willing to stop the adult content in cartoons, such as CBC (www.media-awareness.ca). Even though some stations are trying to prevent it there are many channels such as Disney and Cartoon Network that are supposed to be safe educational programming, but these two channels in particular are one of the top sexually related shows of children's television.

One of the most watched networks by kids and young teenagers is the Disney channel. There have been many shocking circumstances

that one doesn't realize while just watching the Disney channel but if you were to think about the content and research it you would see that there is a good amount of sexual content in each show. Sister Sister is one of the shows that are played everyday on Disney Channel. On one show in particular the girls were on the beach with girls who were very well developed and were running around in bikinis and both sisters were trying to show off their bodies to get boys attention. Some little boys and girls do not need to see this (www.disneychannel.com). Another show on the Disney channel is Kim possible. This is mostly a violent show but it does show some sexual content by showing her midriff the entire show. These sexual references may not be horribly wrong but they do show kids that looking "sexy" is okay.

Another network that is full of adult content is Cartoon Network. One of the oldest cartoons is Looney Tunes; this show shows a good amount of sexuality. For example Bugs

Bunny would always dress up as women and always get hit on by Elmer Fud which in a way is a form of cross dressing and gay relationships. Another shocking factor on the Cartoon Network website is the power puff girls saving wonder women short movie. They save her at the end and say the hope to become well developed super heroes like her one day, which is taken the wrong way and wonder women covers her chest showing that she is a very well developed cartoon (www.cartoonnetwork.com). This adult content is not good for little kids. They might not know exactly what the cartoons are talking about, but they will ask their parents and some younger kids do not need to learn about sex at such a young age.

The Disney Channel and Cartoon Network are only two of the main children's programs that secretly voice adult content. All of the cartoon women in tight outfits and all the sex talk are not meant to be heard by small ears. Although they are subtle innuendos some children

may still know what the cartoons are talking about. When they are older they will see enough provocative images when they are older; so they do not need to start before the age of 10.

Blocking Inappropriate Television

By Jolie Thomas

The issue of television is a major one for many parents, especially where learning concerns are involved. A good number of them refuse to have their children sit before the TV for even short periods, concerned about radiation, destroying their children's eyesight, or interfering with the normal process of learning. Other parents are unsure about the issue and let their children watch for a short time each day, and only if the material has been approved by them. Others hardly give the idea any thought, feeling that since TV is so much a part of modern life, one has to take it as essential in day to day existence. For those concerned about blocking inappropriate television from there

children, there are a few steps that they can take.

The first step that parents can take is to use the television's built in v-chip and rating system. In 1996, Congress passed a law that gives parents the ability to control what their children watch on television. The law set up a rating system called the TV Parental Guidelines. The ratings can help parents avoid programs that contain sex and violence. By using a computer device called the v-chip, parents can block these programs from their televisions. By 2000, all new television sets with screens 13 inches or larger will have the v-chip. The ratings apply to all TV programs *except* news and sports. They can sometimes be found in your local TV listings and appear for 15 seconds at the start of a program.

This ratings system was created to help parents choose programs that are suitable for children, even without the use of the v-chip. Before watching, check your local TV listings to find out if a program contains violence,

sexual content, or strong language. Remember that ratings are not used for news programs, which may show content that is not suitable for young children. Also, TVs with screens smaller than 13 inches will not have the v-chip. So, if your child is allowed to watch TV alone, choose a set that is at least 13 inches so you can use the v-chip to block programs. It is suggested that parents avoid putting a television in your child's bedroom. When used properly, television can inform, educate, and entertain you and your family. By taking an active role in your child's viewing, you can help make watching TV a positive and healthy experience.

There are a few others ways to block inappropriate television, and help a child provide positive viewing habits. First off, you can limit your child's use of TV, movies, and video and computer games to no more than 1 or 2 hours per day. Do not let your child watch TV while doing homework. You can also plan your child's viewing. Instead of flipping through

channels, use a program guide and the TV ratings to help you and your child choose shows. Turn the TV on to watch the program you chose and turn it off when the program is over.

Whenever possible, watch TV with your child and talk about what you see. If your child is very young, he/she may not be able to tell the difference between a show, a commercial, a cartoon, or real life. Explain that characters on TV are make-believe and not real. Some "reality-based" programs may appear to be "real," but most of these shows focus on stories that will attract as many viewers as possible. Often these are stories about tragedy and violence. Much of their content is not appropriate for children. Young children may worry that what they see could happen to them or their family. News broadcasts also contain violent or inappropriate material. If your schedule prevents you from watching TV with your child, talk to her later about what she watched. Better yet, videotape the programs so that you can watch

them with your child at a later time.

Even a poor program can turn out to be a learning experience if you help your child find the right message. Some television programs may portray people as stereotypes. Talk with your child about the real-life roles of women, the elderly, and people of other races that may not be shown on television. Discuss ways that people are different and ways that we are the same. Help your child learn tolerance for others. Remember, if you don't agree with certain subject matter, you can either turn off the TV or explain why you object.

The last and final thing one can do to block inappropriate programming is to give children other options. Watching TV can become a habit for your child. Help your child find other things to do with his time, such as playing, reading, hobbies, and activities with friends and family. A parent is the most important role model in a child's life. Limiting one's own TV viewing and choosing programs

carefully will help a child do the same.

How Cartoons Are Geared Toward Children

By Amy Webb

What sets cartoons apart from all other types of entertainment? Ask any parent or babysitter of a young child and they will tell you that they can keep the attention of a hyper five year old longer than any movie or game show. The short, simple, colorful stories are full of imaginative situations and characters kids either relate to, or identify as a clear villain. At face value this may seem like good programming for our children, but it may be doing more harm than we think. The popular Cartoon Network show "Codename: Kids Next Door" revolves around five children who are undercover agents for a world wide agency fighting parents who want kids to do as they are told and other children who behave, referred to as the "delightful children from down the lane." Their adventures have included trying to stop a

gifted ten year old from going to college early, trying to stop a dentist from giving kids perfect oral hygiene, and trying to stop a scientist from putting an end to school days (Cartoon Network, 2003). When they defeat their enemies they use bubble shooting guns and their enemies are driven away with their good morals going with them. It is not hard to see why this show appeals to kids but do we really want our children to learn they must fight going to school, the dentist, or even eating broccoli?

Another show that may be a bit much for young children to take the right way is another popular Cartoon Network show, "The Powerpuff Girls." It revolves around three little girls who happen to be superheroes and all look and act in different ways so all kids can identify with at least one of them. This show has more obvious lessons to be learned than most shows because each episode is spelled out plainly enough for kids to understand. However, every episode involves at least one elaborate fight scene, after which the girls are praised and

then they go back to acting like normal children (Cartoon Network, 2003). This may confuse some children into thinking that fighting is acceptable because it seems that is what makes the Powerpuff Girls different from them.

Finally, the fairly recent phenomenon known as Anime includes many shows and is perfectly geared towards children because several of the plots are so simple that a child could jump into a story at pretty much any point and still understand that the good guy is going to fight the bad guy for a reason that changes every episode yet most episodes have similar content. Also, the fight scenes are often quite elaborately drawn and colored and so complex that it catches their eye immediately. Even adults sometimes want to mimic a person, style, or talent they see around them so it is to no one's surprise that children would want to do the same. Unfortunately though, much of the Anime shows are made for an older audience who can use their own judgment

as to interpret if the shows are just entertainment or what you should try on the bully who pushed you off the swings. Perhaps the programming we let our children watch is not exactly what we had hoped it would be or maybe parents and guardians are not doing their best to teach children what is real and what is just pretend. Either way, with easy to follow, colorful, action filled adventures featuring characters children can relate to, something needs to be done to protect the kids from today's television. Shows like the ones I have mentioned are springing up everywhere and children will find them, so we should do something about it now.

Violence in Cartoons: What's Up Doc?

By Fleny Mercedes

When cartoons first started out, they were simple animations for entertainment, but as decades have passed, cartoons have evolved into a much more graphic form of entertainment media. Cartoons have changed

from being a simple and silly *Steamboat Willy* and *Mickey Mouse* to a totally new style of humor and action like *South Park* and *Batman: the Animated Series*. Along with this transformation of cartoons came a rise in violent content. Violence has now become standard in cartoons, from "snake whacking" in *The Simpsons* to the ritualistic killing of *South Park's* Kenny, guaranteed to happen in every episode. Violence has almost become a mainstay in the humor of cartoons. What fun is watching *The Roadrunner* if Wiley Coyote never falls off the cliff or blows himself up trying to use rocket-powered roller-skates? Nonetheless, I feel that cartoon violence does have an effect on the behavior of children.

Violent programs on television such as cartoons lead to aggressive behavior by children and teenagers who view those programs.

That's the word from a 1982 report by the National Institute of

Mental Health, a report that confirmed and extended an earlier study done by the Surgeon General. As a result of these and other research findings, the American Psychological Association passed a resolution in February 1985 informing broadcasters and the public of the potential dangers that viewing violence in cartoon programming can have for children. Children who watch a lot of cartoons on television are less aroused by violent scenes than are those who only watch a little; in other words, they're less bothered by violence in general, and less likely to see anything wrong with it. One example: in several studies, those who watched a violent program instead of a nonviolent one were slower to intervene or to call for help when, a little later, they saw younger children fighting or playing destructively.

Studies by George Gerbner, Ph.D., at the University of Pennsylvania, have shown that children's cartoons contain about twenty violent acts each

hour and also that children who watch a lot of television are more likely to think that the world is a scary and dangerous place. Children often behave differently after they've been watching violent cartoon programs on television. In one study done at Pennsylvania State University, about one hundred preschool children were observed both before and after watching television; some watched cartoons that had a lot of aggressive and violent acts in them, and others watched shows that didn't have any kind of violence. The researchers noticed real differences between the kids who watched the violent cartoons and those who watched nonviolent ones. Children who watch the violent cartoons, even 'just funny' cartoons such as *The Simpsons*, were more likely to hit out at their playmates, argue, disobey class rules, leave tasks unfinished, and were less willing to wait for things than those who watched the nonviolent programs,' says Aletha Huston, Ph.D., now at the University of Kansas.

In spite of this accumulated evidence, broadcasters and scientists continue to debate the link between the viewing cartoon violence and children's aggressive behavior. Some broadcasters believe that there is not enough evidence to prove that cartoon violence is harmful. But scientists who have studied this issue say that there is a link between cartoon violence and aggression, and in 1992, the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Television and Society published a report that confirms this view. The report, entitled *Big World, Small Screen: The Role of Television in American Society*, shows that the harmful effects of TV violence do exist.

However, for parents who want to monitor what their children watch, I do feel that a rating system for cartoons would be a

good measure to enact. Although I don't believe that the rating system for television we have now offers very much information to the parent who is trying to protect their child from violence. It's far too general to be useful and it doesn't automatically stop a child from watching a television program. Ideally a good rating system would separate cartoons into two categories "happy violence" and "realistic violence," and a parent could program their TV to only allow one type of programming to be viewed. But currently such a system does not exist and parents must rely upon the current rating system, which does not give a parent enough information, nor does it allow a television to be programmed to omit unwanted programming. Thus, I don't believe that the present rating system is being utilized simply because it is not possible for a parent to control and censor everything a

child watches on television.

Even though violence is a fact of life that young children are eventually going to be exposed to at some point, even if happens to be on the nightly news. They still should not be exposed to so much violence. On the other hand children are far more intelligent than we give them credit, possibly we should encourage them to watch more educational programming and not worry about the violence in cartoons. The numbers of hours spent watching cartoons seems to be related to the way one views the world. If a child is exposed to too much television, specifically violent cartoon shows, he/she may become desensitized to the world. They may see the world in such a negative way that it just makes it that much harder for them to see the good in actually doing the good.

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