

A report  
to Carnegie Corporation  
of New York ---

THE POTENTIAL USES

OF

TELEVISION

IN

PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

by

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## CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION

	<u>Page</u>
SECTION I - The Preschooler and Preschool Education	1
SECTION II - Television and the Preschool Child	8
SECTION III - What Leading Educators Think About A Television Series for Preschoolers	14
SECTION IV - Recommendations for a Television Series	20
SECTION V - Television for Parents	41
SECTION VI - Television and the Disadvantaged Child	45
SECTION VII - Kits and Books	49
ADDENDUM	51

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## INTRODUCTION

The following is a report of recommendations as to possible uses of open-circuit television to stimulate the intellectual and cultural growth in children of preschool age. The report is based on a four-month survey of opinions of leading cognitive psychologists and educators in the field of preschool education, as well as of television producers, film makers and other specialists in the field of children's entertainment. It draws also from extensive research into old and new visual material that could be used or adapted for use on television.

## SECTION I - The Preschooler and Preschool Education

The number of three, four and five-year-old children in the United States has been estimated at around 12 million. In the past few years, this population, once the most neglected, educationally speaking, has marched to the center of the stage. The reasons for this new interest among educators in preschool education are several. The most urgent and best known to the general public centers around the academic achievement gap between disadvantaged and middle class children that manifests itself during the early school years and increases dramatically in the higher grades. The conviction that disadvantaged children are inadequately stimulated and motivated during the preschool years and the belief that the right kind of early intervention can provide adequate compensation have done much to create the present ferment in cognitive development research and preschool education.

The national awakening to the need for more and better education up and down the line is also a factor in the current interest in the years before school. Project Head Start, a massive federal program designed to help disadvantaged preschool children, was only in its second year, when the Educational Policies Commission of the National Education

Association proposed that "all children should have the opportunity to go to school at public expense beginning at the age of four."

Substance aside for the moment, the physical statistics alone suggest the proposal will encounter staggering obstacles. Nearly half the nation's school districts do not now have kindergartens (though about 71% of the country's five year olds are in either nursery school, kindergarten or first grade.) If the NEA's recommendation went into effect tomorrow, about 5,000,000 more four and five year olds would be added to school rolls. If it is remembered that most big urban school systems already rely heavily on part-time teachers and that colleges are just beginning to set up large scale preschool teacher-training programs, the dimensions of the problem of educating all four and five year olds in classrooms begin to emerge. We must add to these statistics the estimated cost of \$2.75 billion a year to handle the extra children -- an estimated cost that does not take into consideration the building of new classrooms.

All of this suggests that most four year olds and many five year olds will not be admitted to our public schools in the foreseeable future, and in the opinion of many qualified observers, most will not receive the optimal intellectual stimulation in the home to fully challenge and

train their rapidly developing intelligence.

Admittedly, the need of most middle class children for more early stimulation is by no means as acute as that of most disadvantaged children, but we nonetheless may have drawn the lines too sharply between the two groups. Most cognitive psychologists agree that the experiences of the first six years are critically important. As the great Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, has said, "the more a child has seen and heard, the more he wants to see and hear." Researcher Benjamin Bloom finds that a very favorable environment in the first four years can affect intelligence by about 2.5 I.Q. points a year, whereas from eight to seventeen, it will affect intelligence by only 0.4 points a year. Clearly, the implications apply to all children. Many observers question whether the average middle class home or even the average nursery school and kindergarten provide the best atmosphere for emotional, physical and intellectual growth.

Basic research into how children learn and what exactly they should be taught in the early years is inconclusive. Traditionally, educators of preschool children have stressed free play, singing, games, stories, conversational exchange, etc. Self selection of most activities is considered a sacred precept -- the child incidentally learning all that

is intellectually appropriate to his age and stage. Great emphasis is placed on emotional and social adjustment.

There has, of course, been growing opposition to this traditional approach. Carl Bereiter of the University of Illinois advocates what might be called a direct frontal assault on the preschooler's intellectual development. He has been successfully teaching four-year-old disadvantaged children to read and do arithmetic with no apparent harmful effects on the children. Some private schools for preschool children have been stressing academic and intellectual development for a number of years. The Montessori techniques that emphasize self-correcting sensory-motor tasks, as a means to intellectual development, are increasingly being employed in nursery schools. Although reliable data from these sources on the efficacy of any given approach is scarce, academic researchers have provided us with enough information to suggest that traditional workers in the field may have been laboring under several misconceptions.

Nearly everyone would agree with them that the best basis and preparation for intellectual learning is the child's sense of well-being and emotional adjustment. But, have they been employing the best methods to help the child to make this adjustment? If the child adjusts to the world by becoming familiar with it, by knowing something about it,

incorporating it, mastering it, then isn't it our responsibility to give him the tools he needs for this mastery? Annemarie Roeper\* has stated, "good adjustment is a basic necessity for learning, but learning also makes for good adjustment." She defines the important tools as the ability to think critically, to know valid reasons, to learn certain cause and effect relationships, and to get certain useful information and relevant facts.

One must also question the concept of difference between work and play that seems to prevail in traditional nursery school. A growing number of educators are coming to the conclusion that it is an artificial division, imposed by adults. One need only observe, for a few hours, any good Montessori class to verify that children receive pleasure from achievement and mastery and do not differentiate between work and play. Throughout the course of this study, I repeatedly saw children totally absorbed when engaged in tasks, scaled to their abilities, which either they had staked out for themselves, or, for that matter, had been assigned. Conversely, I saw a number of apparently bored children, drifting aimlessly from toy to toy, often exhibiting aggressive behavior toward each other, when on their own

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-for gifted children in Detroit, Michigan

during the long free play periods so integral a part of most nursery schools. (Annemarie Roper notes that the behavior of her preschoolers has become noticeably less aggressive since the preschool has become intellectually oriented.)

Another myth that has been handed down over the years has to do with the young child's short attention span. No one who has observed children doubts that they are easily distracted. But, the traditional nursery school, with twenty or more three and four year olds in a room full of toys and equipment, may not, after all, be the ideal place to formulate conclusions about the attention span of young children. Whether or not many hours of viewing television is good for children, we do know that they are capable of long periods of absorption in all kinds of television programs. We know, too, that a young child will remain with a given task or project if it interests him, for surprisingly long periods of time. The experience of any parent who has read story-books to his children will confirm the fact that even very young children can remain interested to a point beyond the parent's endurance.

Until recently, it appears, far from considering the "whole child", educators were virtually ignoring the intellect of preschool children. They seemed to proceed on the notion that, between birth and five years old, a child's

physical and emotional development (rather arbitrarily, it seems to some) should take precedence over his intellectual development. Indeed, we may have been performing a tragic disservice to young children by not sooner recognizing that their emotional, physical and intellectual needs are doubtless interdependent from infancy on. Just as we have long known that we must provide certain ingredients to foster healthy physical and emotional development, so we are at last beginning to inquire into specific actions we might take to help the child realize his full intellectual potential.

But, the national need for more and better educated people and the national demand that we give the disadvantaged child a fair chance at the beginning mean that we cannot wait for the final and definitive word from the researchers, or until there are enough teachers and classrooms to accommodate our preschool population. We must begin to search for new means and techniques to solve our educational problems. It is the recommendation of this report, therefore, that television's potential for fostering the intellectual and cultural development of young children be fully tested and evaluated, beginning in the near future.

SECTION II - Television and the Preschool Child

Although several studies have been done on the effects of mass media on children, none, to my knowledge, has been done on the effects or impact of television on children as young as three, four and five years of age. However, reports from parents, observation, and the studies of older children and the mass media provide us with certain clues about television and the preschool child.

Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle and Edwin B. Parker report in their study Television in the Lives of our Children:

"The first direct experience with television typically comes at age two. Chances are, the child will eavesdrop on a program someone else has tuned in. But he soon begins to explore the world of television and to develop tastes and preferences of his own. By the age of three he is able to shout for his favorite programs... By the age of three, then, the average child is already making fairly regular use of television. He sees a number of 'children's programs', soon branches out into westerns and similar entertainment."

The final sentence of the above quote is perhaps the most significant. It points out that very young children regularly view adult action programs. My own limited poll bears this out; it is difficult to find a young television viewer from Harlem to Greeley, Colorado, who does not cite "Batman" as his favorite television program. Beginning at an early age, we can assume, children are conditioned to expect pow! wham! fast action thrillers from television and certainly highly visual, slickly and expensively produced material. It is clear, also, that for whatever reasons, young children rather quickly graduate to the same shows that their older siblings and their parents view and enjoy, although they do not necessarily lose interest in their favorite children's programs -- at least for a time.

A word about children's programs. Most of those commercially sponsored, seem to be inordinately noisy and mindless affairs. Unfortunately, most serious efforts to provide educational fare for young children have been undertaken on a local basis only, by impecunious educational television stations, and are too often marked by a slow and monotonous pace and a lack of professionalism. One wonders if even such an erstwhile national favorite as "Ding Dong School" would be popular today, in light of the widespread viewing by children of adult programs. My own feeling is

that it would not, that if we are going to attract children to quality children's programs, they must have many of the production values (meaning pace, humor, professional performing talent, film inserts, animation and so forth) to which today's young children have become accustomed.

Anyone who has small television viewers at home can testify to the fascination that commercials hold for children. Parents report that their children learn to recite all sorts of advertising slogans, read product names on the screen (and, more remarkably, elsewhere), and to sing commercial jingles. It is of course open to serious question how valuable the content is that these commercials teach, but they do prove a point: children can and do learn, in the traditional educational sense, from watching television.

If we accept the premise that commercials are effective teachers, it is important to be aware of their characteristics, the most obvious being frequent repetition, clever visual presentation, brevity and clarity. Probably, then, their success is not due to any magic formula. Instead, television commercials appear to have adopted what have always been effective teaching techniques; unfortunately for our children, many teachers may have forgotten what Madison Avenue, with consummate skill, has cribbed from them.

One highly relevant effect reported by Wilbur Schramm

and associates, in their comparison of viewing children with non-viewing children, is that those growing up with television appear to come to school with about a one-year advantage in vocabulary. It is interesting to note that the advantage is not maintained (in the sixth and tenth grades, the two groups did not differ in their total information level), but it is also well to remember that the advantage was gained, incidentally, from viewing entertainment programs. (Incidental learning of all kinds from television programs has created some rather amusing gaps in the knowledge of young children. It is not uncommon to find that a child has no idea where apples come from, but can give you a fairly accurate, if rudimentary account, of how to get a rocket into outer space.)

Schramm's observation raises a troublesome question about television's effect on disadvantaged children. Why, when we know they watch as much, if not more television than middle class children, is their language and conceptual framework not more noticeably altered? There are several possibilities. One is that the language a child hears in a middle class home is constantly reinforced by television and vice versa while the slum home offers little or no reinforcement. Another possibility, of course, is that large amounts of what is said on most shows simply go over the heads of

many young disadvantaged children. It may be that the visual action provides enough of interest to hold their attention. In any case, how television can best be used to educate disadvantaged children, or even, if it can, are urgent questions for both researcher and broadcaster.

As I have said, there is little scientific data on the impact of television on young children, but Schramm and associates, after their study of older children and television, inferred the following about the medium as a teacher of very young children:

".....We should expect that the greatest amount of learning from television would take place in the early years of a child's use of it. The ages from three to eight, let us say, would be the time when television would have the least competition. The child's slate is relatively clean. Almost any experience is new to him and therefore absorbing. And television, as we know, has an enormous power to absorb the attention of a young child. After the child starts school, television has greater competition for attention and interest. But in the years before a child starts to

read, when his horizon is still narrow and his curiosity boundless, when almost everything beyond his home and his little family circle is new -- that is the time when television has a unique opportunity to contribute information and vocabulary skill."