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Tyke TV grows up

Programming for the under-6 group diversifies and educates

By Catherine Schetting -- *Broadcasting & Cable*, 3/5/2001

It appears the children's networks are listening to experts who say that the programs watched by the 2-5 group should be educational. While not all shows for the pre-schoolers teach letters, numbers, shapes and colors, like the standard for today's kids' shows, *Sesame Street*, they strive to introduce children to sharing, problem solving, getting along with others and creativity.

The hit programs for this youngest set generally have one thing in common: They're gentle. They don't involve combat fighting, weapons, intense romance among kids or scary plot lines. They do involve one or more of the following: singing, dancing, silliness, friendship. And when kids get caught up in these shows, they don't realize they're being shown how to share by Barney, how to count by Steve and Blue, or the importance of getting along by Rolie Polie Olie. But that's what programming executives say they are trying to get across.

"I'm convinced they like good stories well told," says John F. Wilson, senior vice president of programming, East, for PBS. "The show has to be based on a story line with strong characters kids can relate to. Anytime you get away from that and try to present a straightforward program on, say, social literacy, kids will get turned off. But if you present Arthur having to get along with his sister, D.W., then you have something kids will watch. They didn't know it, but they were getting a lesson on how to problem-solve, function as a group, share."

PBS's top shows for the 2- to 5-year-olds are *Arthur*, *Teletubbies*, *Dragon Tales*, *Barney* and *Clifford the Big Red Dog*, which is a new animated series based on the books by Norman Bridwell. Newer up-and-comers are *Caillou* and *Zoboomafoo*. The network is finding the Nielsen age breakdown tough, though.

"We're compelled to measure it 2-5 and 6-11 because of Nielsen, but, increasingly, it's unsatisfying to us," Wilson says. "We refer to it as little kids and older little kids, because it's less about age and more about stage. The 2-5 bracket doesn't describe everything; there's a huge range there. A show for school-age kids often draws 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds. But, generally, little children like *Teletubbies*, *Mr. Rogers* and *Barney*. Kids then look toward shows like *Arthur*, *Dragon Tales* and *Clifford*. Those 4- and 5-year-olds often watch *Zoom*, which features big kids. But the viewing habits of kids differ household by household. When my 6-year-old was 2,

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he didn't watch any TV. But my 2-year-old is now into watching what my 6-year-old likes."

Wilson says that, since PBS can't stop little kids from watching shows for bigger kids, where there's more ambiguity in the resolution of stories and the "peril" is more intense, it makes sure the older-skewing shows feature some characters with which 3- and 4-year-olds can identify.

This age/stage issue is something that Nickelodeon reflects in its schedule, as it breaks its programming into two segments: Nick Jr. and Nickelodeon.

"Broadly, we believe we reach 2-14," says Cyma Zarghami, executive vice president and general manager of Nickelodeon. "The core that Nielsen measures is 2-11, but, specifically, we have a whole part of our day devoted to 2-5, which is the Nick Jr. block. The numbers can then be broken down again for 6-11 and also the tweens, 9-14, which is the Nickelodeon block."

Nick Jr. targets little viewers with its biggest franchise hit, *Blue's Clues*, as well as new fare like *Dora the Explorer*, *Little Bill* and the newly launched *Bob the Builder*. *Blue's Clues* remains a favorite because it directly asks children for help in figuring out what the dog, Blue, wants to do, based on clues shown on screen. *Dora the Explorer* features Latina adventurer Dora, who shows kids how to solve problems, while encouraging interaction by counting and speaking Spanish, as well as physical activity, such as clapping hands and jumping around. *Bob the Builder* encourages friends to help each other, solve problems together and provide shoulders (or cranes) to lean on.

The Disney Channel starts its day with a block of programming called Playhouse Disney, aimed at 2- to 5-year-olds. Playhouse shows run until 2 p.m., when Zoog Disney takes over for the afternoon and evening with programs aimed at the 9-14 tween audience, but they get a sprinkling of 6- to 8-year-old viewers (and their parents).

Disney Channel's Rich Ross, general manager and executive vice president of programming and production, says the network targets boys and girls equally, although it reaches more girls than boys with a 60/40 skew.

Hit shows for the youngest set are *Bear in the Big Blue House*, *Rolie Polie Olie* and *The Book of Pooh*, a newly launched show that's peaking in every time slot in which it's shown. The animated *New Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* has aired for years, but the network wanted to put a fresh spin on the silly ol' bear.

"We went to Mitchell Kriegman, who produced *Bear in the Big Blue House*, and told him we wanted to give Pooh a new twist with new characters," Ross says. "He came up with 300-year-old Japanese puppetry called *bunraku* and teamed it with virtual sets, so you can't see the puppeteers on the sets. Now a 5-year-old looks at the show and says, 'Hey, it's my stuffed animal walking around.'"

Another Playhouse Disney hit is *Out of the Box*, which depicts a group of kids and their two caregivers having fun in their backyard playhouse made of giant boxes.

"We developed it for 18 months, and people said it wouldn't work," Ross recalls. "We wanted characters in a show that were caregivers, and people of color are often caregivers. Also, men are part of the caregiving fabric, and that was important for us. Tony and Vivian are vivacious and great, and they show kids how to do things that are fun, as well as how to deal with things they don't want to do."

Although Cartoon Network, Fox Kids and Fox Family don't program specifically for the 2-5 set, some of their shows draw the youngsters in. At Cartoon Network, the shows pre-schoolers like best are *Scooby Doo*, *Dexter's Lab*, *The Bugs and Daffy Show* and *Tom and Jerry*. All but *Dexter's Lab*, about a diminutive boy genius and his secret subterranean laboratory, are reruns of old classics. Fox Kids/Digimon: *Digital Monsters* and *Power Rangers* and the syndicated Scholastic's *The Magic School Bus* are hits with the youngest viewers. Fox Family's *The Adventures of Mary-Kate & Ashley* and *It's Itsy Bitsy Time* attract 4- and 5-year-olds.



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