

# TELEVIZION

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*Nikolaus von Hofacker*

## The first years of life

**In the course of complex early childhood development processes the *Teletubbies* can be a help and fun for young children.**

**In the last 30 years television has become an integral part of the everyday experience of children in industrial nations (Bachmair and Hofmann, 1998). In the meantime the television consumption of pre-school and primary school children amounts to 1 - 3 hours (Report on Television, 1998; Hassler et al, 1993). It is not my intention at this point to discuss or report in detail on the extensive investigations carried out in various countries on the effects of excessive television consumption on children's development, as this would go beyond the scope of this article. No standpoint, however ideological, can deny that nowadays children, sooner or later, inevitably come into contact with the medium of television. I should therefore like to concentrate on the following questions and try to answer them from the point of view of a doctor and psychiatrist specialising in the clinical treatment of children and adolescents:**

- **What significance does this "sooner or later" of the contact with television have for pre-school children? Under what conditions are negative effects on the child's development to be expected from premature or excessive consumption of television at a pre-school age?**
- **What can be demanded of a sensible contact with the medium of television at a pre-school age?**

## Development processes in the first years of life

The young child, in the first years of its life, undergoes an especially intensive development process, whose most salient features include the close intertwining of motor, cognitive and socio-emotional learning processes with the quality of parent-child interaction and relationship. Development in this phase of life proceeds first and foremost in the context of the child-parent relationship. Of the manifold development processes it is in particular the need to explore the environment that has to be emphasised and which can best take place against the background of a secure bonding with a parent. Of special significance in this connection are reliable so-called contingency experiences in dealing with the environment. By contingency experience we understand the child's inherent interest in establishing

relationships between what it does itself and the effects which these actions have on the animate and inanimate environment. Contingency experiences allow the child to experience causality and create relationships. The younger the child is, the closer the temporal connection has to be between what the child does and the consequences of its actions in order to be experienced "contingently": the time between stimulus and response in a baby and a young child amount to no more than 0.5-1 second for the relationship to be experienced between both as contingent (Papousek and Papousek, 1994). Of special significance for the young child are contingent learning experiences which occur in social interaction with an attachment figure, in everyday dialogues with an adult while playing, when a story is being read to the child, in the setting of a conversation and suchlike, ie against the background of a social-emotional experience.

Development in the pre-school period involves coping with a number of very complex development tasks. These include the young child's growing ability to regulate himself, that means, for example, the ability to calm himself down, to maintain growing phases of attention as well as the development of empathy and pro-social behaviour patterns in the second year of life, and finally the development of gender identity and social behaviour patterns in interaction with children of the same age in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of life.

## **Development conditions in the first years of life**

Ideally the young child grows up in a context in which one or both parents have sufficient time to respond to its behavioural needs sensitively and appropriately, but at the same time, where necessary, also to be able to set limits and thus support the child in its various development needs as best they can. Such a "development scope" means for the child that during play it can gather everyday experiences which entail the integration of a large number of complex and different stimuli through different sensory channels: by jumping into a puddle and feeling the cold water on its hands; going to the crawling group and on the way perceiving the various smells and sounds, for example, of nature, of people, of the traffic etc. Later pro-social and social behaviour will be tried out in the kindergarten group. In this way the child's own position in the exchange and interaction with and inside its age group regulates itself. There is no substitute for the diversity of these real-life everyday experiences.

### ***There is no substitute for real-life everyday experiences***

Now it has to be asked, however, what priority such ideally typical opportunities for experience still have nowadays in a society in which one in 5 children in the eastern part and one in 10 in the west and generally every 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> child in large cities lives below the poverty line, ie in a family dependent on social security. A large number of these children grow up with only one parent, usually the mother, who, if she is not dependent on social security, has to go out to work. In this case who can take on the difficult work of bringing up and creating a relationship? It is, as everybody knows, television – highly appreciated by children for a long time - that steps into this vacuum with a vengeance. If for the moment we disregard those programme-makers who are only interested in recruiting ever younger age groups for television, sensible programme producers try, in some cases not without justification, to offer help. In the everyday reality of children from disadvantaged families, in which the interactions at home are characterised by the strains of unemployment, the excessive demands made on a lone parent, the parents' psychological stress, alcohol or drug abuse or lastly by experiences of neglect and violence, the *Teletubbies* soon become a better babysitter, a superior educator and mediator for experiencing the environment in a manner

appropriate to the child's age. The increasing neglect of children in these helpless and overtaxed families can no less be denied than the neglect of the prosperity of those children who are carted from one ballet appointment to the next music lesson and from there to riding lessons – a miscalculation impressively described by Christiane Graf in her book *Ende der Spielzeit* (The End of Playtime). Here educationally valuable television programmes – and the *Teletubbies* can with certain reservations be included among these (see below) – offer a "normality" which is no longer available to these children in their world.

## **The television set as babysitter and teacher**

By arguing that there are in the meantime programmes that are certainly educationally useful even for two-year-olds a justification is created which is readily used by many parents who precisely on account of their being chronically overtaxed have to struggle with constant feelings of guilt and a bad conscience in order not only to simply park their children in front of the television set but also at the same time to do "something good" for them. Here it should not be overlooked that the educational demands of school are forging further ahead into the pre-school area and thus into an age in which the young child actually ought to have a chance to learn in quite a different way from that later on at school, namely by playing, by trial and error and without any pressure or demands to perform, on the side, as it were, and without any specific aim or purpose. Many a young child is prepared for school from the cradle, and television tries increasingly to take on an important role in this function of paving the way. The idea of preparing children for learning at an early age has led to the development of the concept of "readiness to learn", in whose wider environment the *Teletubbies*, too, in the end were created (Home, 1998).

But what happens when a two-year-old watches the *Teletubbies* at half past eight on a Saturday morning? At this time mummy and/or daddy are still in bed or preparing breakfast, if they aren't already at work and glad they are not being pestered by a niggling, whining little brat. However, nowadays even two-year-old children have no difficulty in handling the remote control of a television set and so quickly land, for example, in *Bravo TV* running at the same time on a private channel or in the first news broadcast with live war reports and a bit later in doctors series with disturbing pictures from the emergency room of a large hospital. The world of the *Teletubbies*, easy to understand and assimilate, is in this way soon replaced by emotionally charged, constantly changing pictures that completely overtax the capacity of the young child to perceive and assimilate what it sees.

## **The *Teletubbies* and early viewing – benefits, risks and side-effects**

At this point there is no intention of disputing that programmes like the *Teletubbies* can by all means be of an educational benefit to children who cannot experience their environment in accordance with their age. Much time and know-how has been invested in the development of the programmes; the structure and course of the series does justice to children's processes of perceiving and assimilating in many respects. The individual instalments of the series are funny, often witty, and always varied and entertaining. Especially successful is the music, too, which in its agogics, rhythm and melody is well adapted to the contents of the story. This complies with the baby's and infant's ability, as described by Stern, to perceive transmodally, ie to simultaneously link up series of stimuli that are different, but similar, in their dynamics (Stern, 1985).

On the other hand, it is doubtful what the benefit or incentive is supposed to be of the characters' much criticised "baby language" in which infants' melodic voice patterns are imitated by adults in a completely inappropriate way and individual words are spoken deliberately wrong as if the speaker suffered from dyslalia, ie a speech defect (eg haro instead of hallo). One can critically ask whether all the ideas really do come from children, as the producers emphasise, or whether, given the technical nature of the characters, the children's perception is not meant to be guided in a certain direction at an early age. Equally exaggerated is the claim expressed in the ARD/ZDF Children's Channel's press release that the series stimulates the imagination, demands that children have their own experience and is interactive. This can at best apply to children from an extremely deprived background. The *Teletubbies* are certainly not interactive in the sense that children, as described above, can have the so important contingent environmental experiences – even if one child or another does react to the actions, statements etc. The television set remains a lifeless machine. And yet infants are taken in by precisely this illusion that the machine with the moving pictures is a live person facing them. From their inability to distinguish between direct reality and media reality, two- to three-year-olds try to talk and communicate with the turned-on television set or the figures they see, but they do not receive any contingent reactions. Experiencing a pseudo- or non-contingency quickly has an annoying effect on children at this age and in the end cannot be integrated into their world of experience.

### ***The television set remains a lifeless machine***

Apart from the positive effects of limited television consumption on the development of language and intelligence and on learning performance in childhood (Anderson et al, 1985; Anderson, 1998; Neumann and Charlton, 1990), in recent years precisely the negative consequences of consuming television at too early an age or excessively in childhood have been pointed out. One of these is the risk of developing obesity - which in the meantime has been clearly proven scientifically – from inadequate physical exercise to compensate for the passivity of consuming television (Locard et al, 1992; Dietz, 1993). Chronic restlessness/hyperactivity, states of anxiety, partial weaknesses in performance, depressive and/or aggressive moods, violent impulses breaking through, disorders in rhythms of being asleep and awake and a number of other psychological symptoms (Miller, 1996; Strasburger, 1997) have been repeatedly described, but they are not yet clearly provable on account of the complexity of the conditions under which they arise. There are also indications that watching television impairs perseverance and tenacity when solving difficult problems (see Böhme-Dürr, 1999). It certainly has to be borne in mind that excessive television consumption frequently takes place in psycho-socially strained families and thus in connection with a number of further psychological risk-constellations for the child's development. For this reason it is difficult – and so far not researched adequately enough – to find out what special role excessive television consumption can play in the origin of psychological disorders at pre-school and school age.

## **Recommendations**

The data available on the question of the extent to which infants in industrial nations have contact with the media in general and television in particular are a cause of such concern that the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has felt it was its duty to repeatedly give its opinion on the subject of the "child and television" since the mid-nineties. In its latest statement in August 1999 it makes a number of concrete recommendations on how doctors dealing with children and adolescents can educate parents and families on the consequences of excessive television consumption in childhood and on the critical use of the media. Here

they strongly warn against allowing children under the age of two to watch television at all. They backed this up with recent studies on the maturing of the child's brain which prove that infants require sufficient direct experiences of interaction with parents and other important attachment persons for a healthy maturity of the brain and the development of appropriate social, emotional and cognitive skills.

In the light of the recommendations of the AAP and also the suggestions of Millner, 1996, and Barthelmes, 1999, I regard it as useful to proceed in the following way:

1. In view of the special features of the developmental conditions in the first years of life, watching television under two years, better still under 3 years, cannot be advocated.
2. Watching television "on the side" should be avoided, as the complexity of various stimuli overtaxes the child's capacity to handle these stimuli.
3. As far as possible children should only watch television in the presence of adults, and thus have a chance to talk to adults about what they have seen. On no account should television be used as a babysitter.
4. Children should be prevented from having a free choice of programmes, from zapping about indiscriminately. Ideally children's programmes should be viewed, selected and recorded on video by parents beforehand. This allows the child to stop the film at any time, to talk to the parents about it and also to see parts of the programme again to improve the integration of experiences.
5. Television consumption should be graded by age and at pre-school age be restricted, for example, to 30 minutes a day.
6. Media education begins in the family by parents offering their children role models in a critical and limited use of the medium of television.
7. The child should be offered extensive alternative opportunities for experiences to watching television.
8. The child's room should, as far as possible, be free of electronic media.
9. In its latest statement the AAP gives tips on how parents can be enabled to handle television and other media critically and competently.
10. When the television set becomes a better educator in disadvantaged families or those under strain, it has to be asked what society can contribute in order to offer here a better support for development than the media. Any contribution to improving the reconciliation of family and work is also a contribution to improving the child's opportunities for experiences, and thus an improvement in the alternatives to excessive media consumption, particularly in families under socio-psychological strain.

Assuming these recommendations are heeded, viewing the *Teletubbies* at a pre-school age is certainly not harmful in any way, but can, on the contrary, be thoroughly entertaining. An infant who occasionally watches the *Teletubbies* with his parents in the course of a normal day, but additionally has a large number of other experiences with his parents, siblings and/or other children in different situations will not suffer any negative consequences from such restricted viewing. Yet in an educational context of this kind watching television is not essential.

I should therefore, in conclusion, not like to appear to be warning against the end of the world resulting from pre-school viewing along the lines "For heavens sake not the *Teletubbies*", but by all means to point out the deleterious consequences of excessive television consumption at an early age and thus to cautiously counteract the "Teletubby mania" that is currently setting in throughout Germany. Early and excessive television consumption is all the more far-reaching in its consequences if it occurs with other unfavourable conditions of development. Watching television then quickly becomes a

"gateway drug" for a lifelong attachment, not to say addiction, to the medium. This should be pointed out as a warning.

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## AUTHOR

Nikolaus von Hofacker, MD, is head of the Psychosomatics Treatment Unit for Children and Adolescents at the Municipal Infirmary in Munich-Harlaching.

## INFORMATION

Internationales  
Zentralinstitut  
für das Jugend-  
und Bildungfernsehen  
**IZI**

Tel.: 089 - 59 00 21 40

Fax.: 089 - 59 00 23 79

eMail: [izi@brnet.de](mailto:izi@brnet.de)

internet: [www.izi.de](http://www.izi.de)

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