

TELEVIZION

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Experts' Perceptions and Mothers' Reception of the "Teletubbies":

An Israeli Case Study

It is four thirty in the afternoon. In around 28%¹ of Israeli homes toddlers and pre-schoolers wake up from their afternoon naps or return home from their day-care centers, and rush straight to their living rooms to watch their favorite four *Teletubbies*. An older sibling joins in occasionally while the younger baby in a playpen or infant-seat watches them curiously. Mothers, treasuring the peaceful half-hour relief, rush to the kitchen or the washing-machine to make the best of this time. Others join their children in the viewing experience

The popularity of the *Teletubbies*, an imported British program targeted to toddlers and young preschoolers, attracted our attention for various reasons. At the time the study was conducted, it had been broadcast for about 5 months on Israel Public Television Channel (channel 1). Commercialization of program-related items (toys, cloths, accessories) was just starting. However, the discussion of the program was present in the newspapers. The program is a novelty on Israeli television. Geared to very young audiences, it is attracting children as old as in mid-childhood. In a culture where most educational content for young viewers is broadcast by Israel's Educational Television or is marketed in special video-tapes, the *Teletubbies* was a surprise.

Through our previous research on young viewers, we have concluded that very young children can benefit from television viewing. Lemish (1987; Lemish and Rice, 1986) found that babies as young as a year and certainly as they turn into toddlers, imitated behaviors, learned a vocabulary, internalized concepts (such as sizes, shapes, colors, letters, numbers) and enjoyed programmes designed for them. Tidhar (1987) found that preschool children learned basic concepts and tolerance messages from the early Israeli version of *Sesame Street*. She also found that young children learned initial reading skills from the series named *No Secrets* produced by the Israeli Educational Television designed for this very purpose.

As researchers, a major appeal of the *Teletubbies* for us is its claim to be of a global character – a program located within a universal children's world, aimed to attract young viewers of all ages and all cultures. While very few educational programmes have become such a world-

wide success, the most important one is of course *Sesame Street*, none have been specifically targeted to the pre-language viewer. None were also marketed "as is" that is, without any cultural adaptation (excluding dubbing of minimal linguistic utterances).

This globalized nature of children's television is now at the center of interest of research in the field (see for example Lemish et al, 1998). The tension between the trend for cultural homogeneity on one hand, and the growing self-awareness of local cultures on the other, heightens the discussion of children as the future creators and consumers of culture. This is particularly interesting in the Israeli context, where television has been originally formed to serve an integrating national role and to enhance Israeli values and develop a common cultural identity (Katz, Haas and Gurevitch, 1997). The dramatic changes in the television environment in the last decade with the advent of an additional commercial channel and cable television, further stimulated the debate over television's potential for cultural imperialism in general, and Americanization in particular. Since the television diet of young Israeli viewers' today consists of over 50% imported television programs, it was challenging to examine reactions to a program marketed as culture-free.

In addition, previous research suggests that parents' mediation can play a crucial role in children's processing of television content. The encouragement of positive viewing, reinforcement of messages, verbal clarifications during viewing, explanation and extension, as well as mere joined-viewing are among the parental strategies used (see for example Abelman, 1990; Austin, 1993; Desmond et al, 1985; Messaris, 1987; Reiser, Tessmer and Phelps, 1984; Salomon, 1977). However, Tidhar and Levinsohn (1997) showed that transition from monopoly broadcasting to cable television in Israel induced some changes in patterns of parental control and mediation: In coping with the enriched television environment parents tend to grant more independence to their children's viewing. More children are left to watch television on their own and independently chose the programmes watched. It was interesting to find out whether or not Israeli parents attribute educational qualities to the *Teletubbies*, whether or not they join their young children in viewing and, if so, is there evidence of mediation.

We set therefore to study the initial reception the *Teletubbies* received in Israel as perceived by adults.

The Study

In an attempt to gain insights into these issues, we conducted 29 interviews. Of these, 20 were mothers of 39 children, ranging in age from 6 months to 10½ years. There was varying interest in the *Teletubbies*, from an occasional glance to a daily loyalty. In addition, we interviewed 9 experts (three of which are among the above mothers). Two kinds of experts were included -- media practitioners and academic/educators. Among the first kind, three directors were interviewed: Director of Children's Programming at the Public Television Channel that broadcast the *Teletubbies*; the Director of Programming the Israel Educational Television; and the Director of the Cable Children Channel. In addition we interviewed the Director of the cable channel being planned for young children, and a journalist/ television producer who specializes in young children. The second group consisted of academics and experts on young children's education: a Ministry of Education supervisor of daycare centers; a Ministry of Education supervisor of pre-schools; a specialist in curriculum development for 2-3 year-olds; a special-education expert, and an academic specializing in children and media. Finally, four other interviews were conducted with relatives of the above mothers who insisted on hearing them out: one grandmother, one father, and two female adolescents -- a 16 and a

10½ year-olds.

All interviewees were educated middle-class persons, happy to cooperate. Mothers were reached through snowballing, and experts through our professional contacts. We asked mothers about their children's viewing habits and their specific reactions to the *Teletubbies* during and after viewing. They shared with us their own views of the

Teletubbies and the program's role in their children's lives. The experts offered professional analyses of the program and its potential contribution to young viewers. Interviews were conducted by the authors, lasted from half an hour to an hour, and were hand-written almost per-verbatim.

Perspectives on the Teletubbies

An analysis of the transcripts focused on several themes, which surfaced in the interviews. Interestingly, interviewees agreed on the issues at hand – although often differed in their interpretation and in the value judgement attached to them. As a generalization we may suggest that experts were far more enthusiastic about the *Teletubbies* than mothers, offering an evaluation of the various elements of the program and their appropriateness to the target audience. Mothers, on the other hand, provided a much more centered perspective on their own children's reactions to the program. In cultural-studies terminology, we suggest that as a whole, and not surprisingly, experts were more engaged in textual analysis while mothers focused on its' reception. We turn now to a discussion of the following main themes that emerged from our data: the general perceptions of the educational and production quality of the program; attitudes to values conveyed in the program; and viewing practices and mediation.

Perceptions of the Educational and Production Quality

Both mothers and experts pointed out the unique production values and educational thought invested in the *Teletubbies*. Two themes were salient: the characteristics of the general atmosphere of the program and the nature of its content.

A) A happy, safe but dull television environment?

That the *Teletubbies* offer a safe environment for young children seemed to be agreed upon by all of our participants. "It's a wholesome program" suggested a mother of two pre-school aged girls, "its like...kind of good, no-worry program, pleasant...it's a program that is filled with goodness." Interviewees talked about the "mean world out

there" in which children are raised these days. On the macro societal level, they talked about life with high-tension and demanding for children these days. "Everything is so threatening around and suddenly there is this series that lets children enjoy themselves and connect positively," said a children's-programmes director. "There is such happiness in it. Today's children are exposed to such horrible things, and this is something on the contrary," explained a mother of a pre-school and a toddler daughters.

Occasionally, they described their own child's personal circumstances, as does a mother of a 5 year-old son: "We just moved at the beginning of the year to a new pre-school and it's the first time that he has faced physical and verbal violence and was the youngest at school and I

think it was hard for him...I have the feeling that it [the *Teletubbies*] is an anti-thesis to what happens in pre-school. It is kind of soft and pleasant. It is exactly half an hour after he returns home from pre-school, sits in his own armchair in a totally different world, and I feel that he is re-charging his energy and coming back to life. That's what it seems to me."

Mothers talked about the program as providing a safe environment for the children and thus releasing them from the need of constant supervision of their viewing. As the interviews unfolded, it became clear that many of those middle-class educated families refrain from letting their young ones watch broadcast television, where they have no control over the content, and base most of their children's viewing on selected video-tapes (purchased and/or taped). Given this behavior the *Teletubbies* are an exception. Here they feel that even without pre-viewing the programs, they can rest assured that nothing potentially harmful will appear unexpectedly on the screen.

Many described their children's emotional mood while watching the *Teletubbies* as pure "happiness." They sit with smiles smudged all over their faces, expressing a true sense of peace and happiness. "When she is watching she is just so happy, sitting there smiling and happy," related a mother of a 4½ year-old daughter.

However, while the safe and happy nature of the program was viewed as one of its positive assets, its non-demanding character for children of two years of age or above was more debatable. For some mothers, it provided a relaxing, much needed "time-out" for the child from every-day routine. Others had mixed feelings about it, suggesting the program is undefined, too casual and vague. "It doesn't hurt but it doesn't add either," described one mother of 6 and 3½ year-old girls. "Let's say that she [the younger one] watches many programmes with her [the older one] and it demands a lot of her, and she has to make up lots of parts, and this [the *Teletubbies*] doesn't demand anything. She just rests there on her laurels and doesn't make an effort to understand. Too simple."

One of the experts developed this argument even farther: "Everything is cheerful and goes too easily, and there is no effort or difficulty that a young child experiences every hour and can identify with. Never do they make an effort to reach an object placed too high, or to do something that doesn't work out immediately, or to make a difficult movement. The same goes for language – little children often mumble something and get annoyed when they are not understood. In this program everything goes smoothly. There are no difficulties."

A contrasting view was offered by another mother of 4 and 2 year-old girls: "Everything in life is demanding for her, so what do I care if one program doesn't benefit her but gives her fun."

B) Age-appropriate or debilitating content?

Experts interviewed were unified in praising the efforts invested in the creation of an age-appropriate program for children as young as one to two years. They talked about the simplicity of the program, and the choice to have it situated within the world familiar to the child. They identified elements such as the pleasant pace, repetitiveness, the simple plot lines, the rituals of getting starting and ending each program, the engaging of the senses, the characters, the smiling baby-face in the sun, and the environment. They talked about the process of identification with the characters, the aesthetics of the scenery, and the role of movement and music. One of the experts couldn't contain her admiration: "I looked upon it as a miracle. I was stunned. I have never seen such a thing. Such an attitude towards this age group."

However, consideration about the content of the program must address its appropriateness given the diversity of viewing ages. For example, a mother of a 5 year- old who complained that the program was too simplistic or that the vocabulary too limited, has her own child in mind, and not the original target audience. Many were perplexed by the fact that such an "infantile" program could be of interest to their much older bright, well-developed and advanced offspring. In struggling with this dilemma, one of the experts confessed: "When I first saw the program, I did not understand its power. My respect for the program developed only when I saw the effect it has on children...You can't argue with facts – and the children love it."

Several content-oriented issues came up frequently in the interviews. The role of language was a rather dominant one. Interviewees were in agreement that a conscious effort was made to use a simple, clear language geared at the language-acquisition stage. Experts referred to the use of simple pre-language syllables (including choice of names for the characters) and giggles. One particularly praised the minimalist use of language: "It's the physical part [I like]. It doesn't come from the verbal. Television always handled things verbally and that is quite oppressive for children." Another mother of three girls, aged 10 and 8 year-old and a 17 month toddler said: "It's O.K. to have them encounter a language that a child can understand. It's good. They are not talking in a defective way but in a way that babies talk. I have no problem with this." Mothers noticed that use of language was purposefully minimal and simplistic, but were pleased with the fact that there were no linguistic mistakes or unacceptable expressions.

Others were critical, as was a mother of two girls aged 4 and 1½ who said: "the text is retarded. The dialogue – 10 words in an episode – as in a play by Becket. What's the point? When compared to Israeli programmes – in those programmes they talk. They have a

rich language. One should talk. First of all – talk. The words the *Teletubbies* say are correct but there are no complete sentences even. Something rather strange." Another mother of 4 year-old and an 18 month old girls: "... adults talk like adults and not like children. All the research shows that you need to talk to a child like a human being and not in their own language." This debate was evident among the experts too. One praised the use of primary syllables and short sentences, while another was critical of the use of "gibberish" syllables. Some mothers tried to compensate for the absence of explicit verbal labeling through their own mediation (see below).

A second issue which emerged was related to the messages conveyed in the program. The choice to focus on the familiar in the young viewer's life, the simplicity of the presentation, and the repetitiveness were praised by most. "The program deals with concepts that are close to the world of children of this age, in the here and now, and it does it nicely. It reinforces each concept from various angles, with lots of repetitions that are important for this age. The program itself is aesthetic and pretty. The colors are tranquil and the atmosphere is one of happiness. The transition between the segments is appropriate for the concentration span of children this age – short concentration span," noted one of the experts. A second one compared the program enthusiastically to other viewing options: " In contrast to the pace of advertising, and even in *Sesame Street*, where everything is boom-- boom and quick-quick-quick, hit them on the head with a hammer. Here there is consideration all the time, not to shock but to go with the children. There is preparation for every single move, a hint, it's coming...they get the messages without hitting them with on the head a hammer to let them know that we are educating them." Many examples were provided for relevant episodes from children's daily life: for example, going to the beach, riding the bike, making soap-bubbles.

Particular attention was devoted to the film segments of the program which appear on their body-screen and are repeated twice in a row. Clearly, the interest in this element develops with age and with viewing the program. However, mothers and experts had mixed reactions to it. Some perceived this realistic section to be the most educational and valuable part of the program from which their children were benefiting the most. "I think it is very successful, nice. It's a model that exists in many programmes that characters take you to a different story, when they read a story in a program etc. It doesn't stay within their own world. It's a connecting point to our world – realistic

characters. Things from children's lives," explained a mother of 6 and 3½ year-old daughters. Others criticized these film segments for presenting much older children and experiences remote from viewers' lives. One of the experts presented a sharp criticism: "There is a wide gap between the films and the rest [of the program]. It throws the young child into something aimed at too high level for him. Even the children in those films are much older. The reality in these films is not familiar to young children and is not presented at their eye-level, from their perspective. It looks as if they just planted those segments from an archive of programmes for older children." Another expert expressed mixed feelings about the need to adapt to an innovative production decision: "There is something problematic about viewing something electronic that comes out of the stomach. It creates for a moment an unpleasant sense. But when you think of the idea that the stomach is our potential for continuation; that the baby develops in his mother's belly and all future education is also something developing. So maybe it is correct that those films in the stomach present older, more developed children than the audience."

The familiar world and its relevancy to their own experiences charm the viewers: several mothers reported imitative behavior such as singing the songs, and joining in the giggling and movements, making soap bubbles, eating *Teletubbies'* food (pudding and toast), sliding (into their homes), riding up a hill (like Po and her scotter), *Teletubby* hugs and games, scary lion, wearing a particular color like a favorite character ("today I am Dipsi") and more. Many repeated utterances: "Where is Dipsi? Where is Tinki-Winki?" "Bye-bye" "Oh-oh!" etc, in their original intonation.

While both experts and mothers were generally supportive of the program's content, many felt that it could have done more. Specifically for the older audience that it seems to attract as well. This point was often brought up in the context of a comparison to two other highly praised educational programmes geared at pre-schoolers in Israel and broadcast on Israel's Educational Television: *Sesame Street* (an Israeli co-production with CTW) and the *Lovely butterfly*. As one mother put it: "I prefer a hundred times more that he views *Sesame Street*. Maybe I don't know the *Teletubbies* well enough, maybe there is something deeper here from what I imagine, but the messages in *Sesame Street* are much deeper and it speaks to me much more. Except maybe for those segments of the television in the belly that each time it is a different topic."

Others compared the *Teletubbie* to video-tapes purchased especially for the children. As one particularly negative mother to two girls, 5 and 1½ year-olds said: "In my opinion this is a boring program. The voice-over is not much, there are hardly any words in the program, and everything is so monotonous. Not much movement, and there is very little one can learn from it. I like it when the girls learn something from the tapes or activate themselves. In front of *Barnie's Friends*, for example, she dances and sings, and here she is only watching. Four dolls that you can hardly understand what they are saying and most of what you see is that they walk..In other tapes there is a story, or a legend or some activity and also learning, and here not."

Attitudes to Values Conveyed in the Program

Among the issues discussed with the interviewees, the following three received particular attention: the gender of the *Teletubbies*, the techno-natural environment and the universal pretense of the program.

A) Towards a non-gendered society?

The four characters – Tinki-Winki, Dipsi, La-la, and Po, are by far the focus of attraction for the young viewers, as well as role models for behavior and sources of identification. Their colorfulness, softness, childishness, cheerfulness and playfulness, and smiling faces were characteristics often mentioned by the interviewees as explanations for their popularity. More specifically, they noticed their movements, clumsy and abrupt as those of young children; and even their puffed-up behinds resembling a diapered toddler.

While some of the interviewees found the characters to be non-attractive, even ugly in a way, the children accepted their non-human features as natural. According to the adults, the young viewers perceive them as dolls – to hold, hug and play with. Many children owned one or more of the dolls or were actively nagging their parents to get them.

Interviewees appreciated the attempt at creating a diversity: the differences in size (perceived as difference in age as well) between the figures; the slightly darker skin of one of the figures; and representation of both genders. While many mothers weren't sure of the gender identity of the characters, they were certain that their children easily identified them as boys or girls. It is worth noting that in the Israeli case, the Hebrew language assigns different suffixes to female and male.

The treatment of gender-related issues constituted another significant theme in the interviews. Most adults detected a purposeful blurring of gender-roles in the program.

One expert suggested that: "the dolls do not have a sexual identity, they are closer to animals than to human dolls." Another explained that: "the lack of sexual identity of the dolls is like its absence in babies – when you see a baby under one year you can't tell if it's a boy or a girl. That's the way it is here." Occasionally, an interviewee expressed a discomfort with this lack of identity: "It looks funny. They don't have any sexuality. So what, are we not sexual creatures? It's not logical. It's true that the

female-Smurf is pretty with a bow and a dress and the guys love her. But at least it is clear that she is a female. I don't know, it's an interesting phenomenon. It's different."

Many interviewees however, dismissed gender identity as a non-issue. They were sure that their children had no problem deciding who is who and none of them could recall incidents of confusion or questions raised regarding gender. A few were especially pleased: "It's great that the differences are blurred. It is clear to my daughter who is a girl and who is a boy. I think it is great. Those are so many stereotypical programs, that I think it is great. Those are kids who don't have any prejudices yet." Another said: "The fact that the purple one walks around with a purse and he is a boy is fine. It is fine that there is no female or male stereotypes and no stigma." Our 10½ year-old female interviewee, sister to a 2 year-old boy was tried to explain the process of distinguishing between the characters: "You can tell who is a boy or a girl first by their voices – Tinki Winki and Dipsi are boys and La-la and Po are girls. And also by their names." When she was asked specifically about Tinki-Winki's red

purse, she replied: "I think it is funny. In my opinion they are giving Tinki-Winki the personality of a girl. For example, they let him dance with La-la's skirt. It looks very funny but the babies don't understand. The red color of the purse is both for boys and for girls, but its shape is of a girl's. In my opinion all the *teletubbies* are everything together – they are neither a boy nor a girl."

Reference to the potential homosexual identity of Tinki-Winki, and issue that was debated in the media sometime prior to our study, was dismissed by most interviewees. "It's adults' none sense. We don't care and the children don't care. It occupies the sick mind of adults who are searching for sensations," said one expert. They encountered the debate through media coverage but found it to be completely non-relevant to their own family.

B) A futuristic techno-natural environment?

The unique environment of the *Teletubbies* – combination of nature and technology - received a lot of attention in the interviews and raised a variety of reactions. "There is an attempt to create a fantasy world," explains one of the experts, "there is an attempt to create something realistically magical, protected, and focused. Part of a complex of dialogue between colors and material. It seems to me not accidental but purposeful. It is important how the colors and materials 'talk' to one another, there is kind of artistic thought in it. There is an attempt to connect progress with simple materials and its' pretty."

The seemingly "pastoral," "wonderland" even "sterile" environment raised mixed feelings. The artificial green grass, hills, and plastic flowers were perceived as too "kitsch" by some. The rabbits as "out of context." One mother of three daughters related her initial reaction: "At first I was stunned from the visual aspect. It seemed so computerized, everything was so ordered, the grass too green, and those rabbits – something too realistic. There was even kind of coldness from being too clean and too computerized." However, most agreed that the natural environment created a relaxing, aesthetic, and peaceful atmosphere.

The technological elements – the home, various appliances, and furniture were perceived by some as too cold and alienating. "The child can identify nature without mediation, but the technological space is unclear, alienated, un-identifiable," argued one expert. There is an attempt to "cutifie" technology, suggests one mother. Others complained in particular against the non-homey feelings created by the *Teletubbies* home: "...their blankets, their beds. The home is very cold. The little metallic blankets and those tiny beds; that was something very un-homey," described a mother of a 3 year-old girl and a 6-month baby boy. "Life is not like that. I don't understand what it reflects. It is not natural. The creatures are not human. A different planete," said a mother to a 5 year-old son and 2½ year-old daughter.

Others, on the other hand, found the technology to be representative of the urban environment in which most children are raised today. "They present a non-threatening technology, based on things one sees at home: vacuum cleaner, toaster, familiar gadgets. They recognize that the struggle with the technological side of life is not less difficult than that of nature – both environments demand learning," suggested a mother of two girls, 8 and 5 year-old, and a 16 month old son.

Many appreciated the combination between nature and technology, preparing children to the world in which they are being raised, as one expert said: "There are lots of elements of technology in one small program; and at the same time it returns us back to nature. This is a very important message - that in principle we belong to nature." Another expert suggested: "The right thing in this case is for them to connect with the innovative and futuristic...the

connection of futurism with nature and scenery will always be there." A mother of 2 year-old twin boys had similar reflections: "I like the combination of pastoral and technology. The background is aesthetic, visually pleasant. This diffusion is important in the post-modern world – the absence of definiteness, how to break inter-disciplinary frameworks. Man needs both nature and technology and creative thinking breaks boundaries." Others were particularly attracted to the fact the

technology was incorporated within a clean and aesthetic environment rather than in association with pollution and ugliness. Interestingly, interviewees were aware of the fact that their interpretations of the environment, as well as their reservations from it, were not shared by their children. In their view, young viewers seemed to naturally accept the environment as is.

C) A universal or local world?

Our attempt to tackle the perceived global nature of the program stimulated thoughtful reactions among our interviewees. Contrary to expectations, most perceived the universal, de-contextualized characteristics of the *Teletubbies* as a relief from the social pressure to raise children as Israelis and Jews. "There are enough programmes that try to insert Israeli ways of life. We do not need to be attached to our Israeliness in every program," said one expert. A mother of a 4 year-old son stated: "It's a kind of wonderland. I don't see anything wrong with it. I don't think that you have to instill in him the fact that he is an Israeli and a Jew every second. As long as it educates to human values without exception of religion, race and gender, then it is OK from my point of view." One expert-mother of three young girls stated bluntly: "Maybe part of it is the fact that it is so detached and foreign. In others program I am constantly saying to myself: 'this is sexist, and this guy is with a yamaka [religious head-cover], and here it is so rootless that nothing will make me anxious and I don't feel that I have to be on guard to mediate because it is this way or that way. The one half hour a day that I don't have to intervene."

Nevertheless, some interviewees had reservations concerning the true meaning of the universality presented in the program. They inserted the fact that the program and its values are clearly Western, and that it is situated within children's culture. They also pointed out that the fact of the matter is that most of what Israeli youngsters watch on television is imported and not local, and that there is a need for both. "I think there is a need for both the global and the local. Depends on what's the route. They don't mind it, they have this need too. They relate to it. But 90% of what they watch is not Israeli. It's the context of the Western culture, it is not the Third World. So this is true for most of the programs. Maybe because the technological orientation it is perceived like this by adults, in comparison to local production where the local context is purposefully apparent," reflected a mother of 6 and 3½ year-old girls.

One particular theme of contextual nature raised by the interviewees was that of the voice-over dubbing. Many complained about the poor quality of the dubbing. A mother of 2 year-old twin boys said: "I am bothered by the fact that they left the English voices in the background. The Hebrew voices are delayed and are not in sync with the picture. Sometimes there are inaccuracies in the translation. For example, not every yellow flower is a chrysanthemum. In particular, I am bothered by the voices in the background and the imbalance of the volume of the Hebrew speech. When we watch I constantly have to set the volume on the remote control: one is speaking too loud and the other in such a soft voice that is hardly heard."

The discussion over dubbing is much more than a technical issue, since it serves as a

mechanism for "glocalizing," a process by which global content is deemed locally meaningful. The example of the "yellow flower" translated into a common Israeli flower – the chrysanthemum – is one such specific illustration. Another more general issue is that of the gendered nature of the Hebrew language. Since all verbs and adjectives are conjugated differently for females and males, the characters and objects are immediately identified as belonging to one gender or another. This non-escapable nature of the language complicates any attempt to present a gender-biased free world, as has been discussed above.

Finally, even a seemingly universal and culture-free program as the *Teletubbies* is not protected against the localized nature of audience interpretation. Many of the interviewees were sensitive to particular foreign content elements . One mentioned "a

black woman singing gospel music," another "going to school on by boat," and yet another mentioned the episode where a little girl brings her rabbit to a veterinarian: "This is so unlike Israeli atmosphere – were in Israel does one go to a big animal hospital with a rabbit!" A few noticed the British roots of the program. As one expert-mother of 3 daughters said: " They showed children, a few black and less blond ones, although those black children were in those British lawns... the clouds and the weather is so British...so unlike Israeli. Here everything is yellowish and there it is all green and blue-like. The films are so British in my opinion. Those children, blond and red-heads, are so English."

Other illustrations suggest that viewers not only detect foreign elements in the program, but also embrace that which is perceived as familiar. One expert suggested

that the program could be used for Israeli educational purposes: "For example, there is this chapter about pairs of animals. One could connect through it to the story of Noah's Ark. Also you can connect through the rain and clouds and compare to our own everyday experience." A particularly unusual local association emerged in an interview with two experts, one of them a mother of 3 year-old daughter: "The visual choice of the artificial green hills and that bunker...as an Israeli, the bunker doesn't make me feel good, it looks like a military shelter." To this, the mother-expert adds: "Just like Ammunition Hill, exactly." The association between the *Teletubbies'* home and a military shelter, and in particular to Ammunition Hill, a famous battle-site in Jerusalem, is uniquely Israeli. It suggests that a truly context-free program content is impossible to achieve since the audience is culturally situated and is actively negotiating meanings (Fiske, 1987).

Viewing Practices and Mediation

Similar to what was revealed by Tidhar and Levinsohn (1997) concerning the enriched cable environment in Israel, most of our interviewees tended to leave their children to watch the *Teletubbies* on their own. In this particular case, the perception of the program as "safe television environment" contributed to this pattern. Several mothers reported using the program as a means of regulating the child's daily schedule. For example, a mother of a 2 year-old boy recalled: "In the beginning we heard about the program from the newspaper and we decided to wake him up for viewing, and to begin regulating his schedule since the very first day of the broadcasts. I woke him up: 'come see the dolls.'" Another mother of 5 year-old boy and a 2½ year-old girl commented: "It is significant that it is there everyday at 4:30 p.m., and if he wants to watch it – this is the time."

Nevertheless, quite a few mothers reported viewing with their young children and engaging in

active mediation. Mediation was partially stimulated by their perception of the dullness of the language and their drive to compensate for this deficiency. As a mother of 16 month-old twin boy and girl said: "It makes a difference if they watch with me – they can watch for a longer period of time, and I explain to them so that things are more comprehensible. If they show them [*Teletubbies*] jumping, but do not say that they are jumping, I say it: 'here they are jumping,' or 'here is Lala jumping.' I often feel that because of the translation they miss something when there are words and terms that could be used and are not stated in words. For example, when the *Teletubbies* do something and they do not use the language to say it, it is a pity. Every action that they are engaged in, they should tell them [the viewers] in words, and they do not do that; and that is why I feel a need to sit with the children and tell them and explain to them."

A mother of a 16 month-old boy noted: "I always watch with him. There are, for example, these animals, and they don't always say their names, pairs like in Noah's Ark. So I tell him the names of the animals. I also always say: 'a yellow sun, flowers, rabbits.'" In another household, it is the role of the grandmother of 2 year-old twin boys to reinforce language skills. She reported that she talked to them all the time and describing what is on the screen in her own words.

As noted earlier, in the Israeli context, the linguistic limitations of the program were amplified by the incomplete dubbing of the original English voice-over. Naturally, mothers who were aware of this weakness yet appreciated the overall value of the program, decided to actively invest in labeling and verbalization. Such language enrichment strategies were specifically characteristics of mothers' whose toddlers were at the critical stage of language acquisition.

In addition to direct labeling mediation, a rich variety of other strategies were revealed by the experts and more highly educated mothers in our study. Among these were: explanation of concepts, answering the child's questions, asking leading questions, analysis of situations presented, relating content to the child's familiar real world, engaging games (such as searching for objects on the screen), and stimulation of viewing interests and expectations (e. g., "where are the *Teletubbies*, where have they gone?"). Many of these strategies were reported in previous research on toddlers (Lemish and Rice, 1986).

The way the various strategies are integrated in the routine viewing process was vividly described by one expert-mother of 3½ year-old twin boy and girl and a 20 month-old boy: "When I see things that can contribute, I direct their attention. For example, I encourage them to discover objects on the screen. In most cases, I ask them questions and I often tell the little one the name of the object that we see, what and who it is. When they show in the film section things that resemble their own environment, like the clouds and the rain, I expand the explanation and when they show unfamiliar things such as dolphins, I try to explain to them what they are. The artificial environment is hard to explain because it can not be related to something that they know, and I can not tell them 'this is like so and so.'"

Another mother of 8 and 5 year-old girls and 16 month-old boy said: "When I watch with them, we clarify situations. When their nanny watches with them, she provides explanations and repeats with them basic concepts. When the children watch on their own, the 5 year-old sister [who is an expert on the program] tells her young brother and their 8 year-old sister, what is going to happen and raises their expectations."

As this final illustration suggests, siblings also play an occasional role in mediation, especially in explaining who is who and in predicting further developments on the screen. This sibling involvement has been documented as contributing to learning by Alexander et al (1986).

Concluding Comments

Overall, our reception case-study reveals favoring attitudes towards the *Teletubbies* in Israel, among middle-class and educated Israeli mothers and their children, as well as among experts. The professional and educational investment in the program is well recognized and appreciated, and mothers' allow – sometimes even encourage – their young children to view the program regularly.

The traditional high emphasis that Jewish heritage in general and Israeli society in particular place on education, is reflected in appreciation of the educational merit of the program and of the efforts made to meet the developmental needs of very young viewers. References made about values conveyed by the program such as relaxed, aesthetic, healthy ecological environment can be interpreted within this framework.

On the other hand, criticism related to the rather limited learning opportunities offered by the *Teletubbies* to slightly older children, both in concept development as well as in language enrichment, can also be related to the same point of departure. It is of no surprise then, that some mothers invested special efforts in compensating mediation strategies to enrich the educational potential of the program to their children. This attitude probably stemmed from the attraction of the program to children older than the intended target audience. In this respect, the *Teletubbies'* popularity can be viewed as a double-edged sword.

The rapidly expanding multi-channel environment in Israel has stimulated debates over the negative potential of television during the formative years of early childhood. Consequently, efforts were made at various educational interventions (Lemish and Lemish, 1997; Tidhar, 1996). Educated mothers, such as those represented in our study, have clearly been effected by these social concerns. In the typical television diet of mostly imported high-paced, commercialized and often violent programmes – the *Teleteubbies* stand out as an island of tranquillity. Its harmless non-violent nature and cheerful optimistic atmosphere, provide mothers with a sense of comfort regarding their children's exposure to the program.

Even those of the interviewees who dismissed television's role as an educator and expressed their view that the effects of television on children are over-rated, appreciated the pleasant nature of the program as a viewing experience. "Com'on," said one mother-expert, "half an hour of television can hurt language development?! We give too much credit to television. It [the *Teletubbies*] just gives children legitimization to feel good about themselves for a minute; that there is someone on the same level as they are and doesn't just push them forward and pull them forward, since we are all the time pushing them forward, forward, forward..."

Finally, the Western culture of childhood reflected in the program appealed to our interviewees. In a society that is intensively pre-occupied with issues of cultural identity and integration, such as Israel, this attraction deserves attention. Apparently, our highly educated, secular western-oriented mothers feel comfortable with the values that the program conveys. Several mothers even seem to be relieved of the constant need to reinforce Israeli and Jewish identity in their children which is salient in many locally produced children's programs.

In conclusion our case-study reveals that for a host of reasons and considerations, Israeli experts and middle-class mothers and children were highly receptive of the *Teletubbies*. It is of great interest to examine whether such positive reception carries over to other sections of

Israeli society, differing by class, education, religion and ethnicity.

NOTE:

¹ Ratings for the month of August 1999, as reported in an interview with director of children's programmes for the Israeli Public Television Channel, carrier of the *Teletubbies*. Among the 4-7 year-old population, ratings fluctuated during that months between 22-40%, and among 0-3 year-olds – between 3-12%.

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