

TELEVIZION

International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI)

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Claudia Höller and Sabine Müller

"Eh-Oh – it's Teletubby time" - The results of a qualitative investigation

No problems are to be expected from the *Teletubbies*. But children should be given a chance to move and express themselves during and after the broadcast.

"Are the *Teletubbies* really suitable for young children?" "Do we have to have all this repetition?" And above all: "What about this language?" These are the questions asked by annoyed and worried parents who fear a negative influence of the infants' programme *Teletubbies* on their children. For even 2-year-olds enthusiastically watch the *Teletubbies*.

These and other questions are examined by the study, which the Children's Channel (*Kinderkanal*) commissioned "*weiterbildung live*" (further education live) to carry out.

In a qualitative investigation 11 children at a day nursery aged from two to five years were observed and interviewed to find answers to the following questions:

- How do children experience the *Teletubbies*?
- What holds their attention?
- What allows it to stray?
- What is the effect of the *Teletubbies*' language on the children?
- With whom or what do they identify?
- How do they experience the ritual in the programme?

Within a period of three weeks children who also see the *Teletubbies* at home, watched several *Teletubbies* films in their day-nursery. Their behaviour and reactions while watching and subsequent play situations were recorded on video and evaluated against the background of age- and gender-specific features. In addition, a developmental profile with the individual development level and development themes was drawn up. Interviewing and questioning the parents and educators as well as the development-psychological assessment of those accompanying the project formed the basis for this. The investigation produced the following findings:

The *Teletubbies* offer the children chiefly fun and entertainment

Experiencing enjoyment and entertaining themselves are the children's major experience-qualities of the *Teletubbies*. The children displayed no behaviour whatsoever that indicated fear-triggering or tension-loaded elements in the programme. It mediates a calm and happy atmosphere that helps the children to relax. In the observation situations the children accordingly set up their "viewing place" with blankets and cushions, and some of them lay down while watching.

- The 5-year-old, otherwise rather wild, Robert lies down in front of the television, relaxed, and watches quietly.
- When 3-year-old Tom watches how the *Teletubbies* jump out of their earth hill at the beginning of the programme he laughs merrily with the others.
- Five-year-old Jasmin waves cheerfully when the *Teletubbies* greet the viewers.
- Four-year-old Moritz happily sings the *Teletubbies'* welcoming song.

Pre-school children have no trouble assimilating the *Teletubbies* and are encouraged to join in

The design and structure of the programme are in keeping with pre-school children's potential to perceive and assimilate. The pictures remain in view for some time, the cuts are long, the strands of the plot are simple, and all this, together with the linguistic and musical design set in at the perceptual features peculiar to pre-school children. The format of the programme gives the children a chance to turn away from the television now and then, to assimilate what has happened in the game or conversation or to turn to other activities.

- Two-year-old Jana sees children painting on television. She stands up, fetches pens and paper and joins in the painting in front of the television set.
- Three-year-old Tom and 5-year-old Jasmin talk about snakes when they see a child making a snake mask.
- After watching the *Teletubbies* 3-year-old Hans and 5-year-old Jill sit down at the painting table and paint.

Children identify with the *Teletubbies*

The 2- to 3-year-old children identify with the *Teletubby* characters because they look and behave like young children. They recognise on television their own play preferences and movement patterns and feel they are involved.

- When 2-year-old Daniela sees the *Teletubbies* she laughs and calls, "There Tabby." Her own movement sequences are still similar to those of the *Teletubbies*.
- Jana(2) calls, "There ball!" and laughs for joy when she sees *Laa Laa* playing with a ball.

Four- to 5-year-old children identify with the *Teletubbies* as a group of friends that plays and keeps together. Friendship is an important development theme at this age level. The children are increasingly searching for models of successful friendship with peers. The *Teletubbies* get on well together, each relating to the other.

- Lars finds all the *Teletubbies* equally good. After the programme he plays at chasing and hide-and-seek with all the *Teletubby*-dolls.

- Jill (five years old) paints all four *Teletubbies* as friends who belong together.

Two- to three-year-old children are positively stimulated and supported in their development by the *Teletubbies*

The film inserts and play scenes in the programme are in keeping with the horizon of this age group's experiences. In each case they offer new information. While watching television the perception of 2- to 3-year-old children is orientated chiefly by known, recognisable elements. Children see in the *Teletubbies* familiar toys and short play scenes which are known to them from their own life-environment. New elements, such as numbers and words, are repeated, so that the children slowly come to know them. The programme provides stimuli, enough time to join in and to move.

- Diana, two years old, begins to count after she has seen the *Teletubbies*.
- Three-year-old Hans sees children playing a shadow game and copies the figures with his hands.
- Two-year-old Jana jumps up and hops around like Laa Laa's ball.

Four- to 5-year-old children can relax while they watch, but they are not given any new stimulation for their development

They find the *Teletubbies* nice, but more suitable for relaxing and as a background medium.

- While the programme is being shown Vera and Leonie, both four years old, fetch some paper and cut out little paper blankets. Now and again they look at the television.
- Jill (five years) watches *Teletubbies* with her thumb in her mouth and while the insert is being repeated asks, "When will it be over?"
- A group of three boys builds a tower of cushions during the film.

The programme offers the children orientation and the chance to experience themselves as competent

The many repetitions and rituals in the programme give the children an orientation and help them to follow the story without any effort.

- The children experience themselves as competent, because they can recognise and sort things out and give them names.
- "Now they are saying Eh-Oh", "Now they are saying bye-bye", are Markus's comments on what is happening. From the rituals he recognises the structure of the programme and can adjust emotionally to them.
- "When the speaking tube is at the front I know the programme is over," says 5-year-old Robert and can then mentally adjust to the end and open up for new situations in his daily routine.

The *Teletubbies* do not have a negative influence on language development

The design of the programme stimulates children to join in the singing and to comment on the actions. The movement impulses that are triggered during the programme support language development, as the child grasps the meaning of the language more easily through the action. While viewing, the children are pleased when they recognise known elements and also express this by means of language.

- Daniela, aged two, still cannot say very much. She speaks the well-known *Teletubby* words during and after watching the programme. She experiences pleasure at her own voice and experiences that others listen to her.
- "Now the ball is bouncing into the house," 3-year-old Moritz comments on the action.

In conclusion it can be said that no negative influences on children's development are to be expected. The programme is in keeping with pre-school children's development-conditioned requirements and interests. The structure and design of the programme encourage the children to join in and to move, and provide impulses that support the children's development. It is important for the children to be allowed to move and express themselves during and after the programme. Observations of the children while watching the *Teletubbies* showed that they take these "television breaks" for themselves. And it is precisely this that is made possible by the design of the programme with its slow pace, repetitions and ritualised sequence.

THE AUTHORS

Claudia Höller and Sabine Müller are graduate trainers of handicapped people and work for "*weiterbildung live*" in Bad Honnef.

INFORMATION

Internationales
Zentralinstitut
für das Jugend-
und Bildungsfernsehen
IZI

Tel.: 089 - 59 00 21 40
Fax.: 089 - 59 00 23 79
eMail: izi@brnet.de

internet: www.izi.de

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