

Frank Beckmann

“Why are they doing that?”

Questions on war

In crisis situations the Children’s Channel of ARD and ZDF provides information which makes the overall scheme of events understandable for children without expecting too much of them. Human suffering is deliberately not shown in close-up shots. In crisis situations programmes and internet pages become forums that allow children to have their say.

Why are they doing that?” – “Can that happen here?” – “How can I help?” – questions from children that we keep on hearing when crises break out. It was like that during the Kosovo War, the Gulf War and also after the attack on the World Trade Center. KI.KA, the Children’s Channel of ARD and ZDF¹, has always tried to find answers when children are emotionally affected by dramatic events in the world. We have changed our programming and reacted with special reports. And even if we could not give an answer to all the questions, it was important to enter into a dialogue with our viewers.

For children crisis situations are emotional states of emergency. They have partly real and partly irrational fears. When they see on programmes made for adults that, for example, in Kosovo – only a few hundred kilometres away from Germany – missiles are exploding, the shock is great from the children’s point of view. They ask themselves, “How do I know whether our cellar will withstand the missiles?” In these situations children’s television can put events into perspective

and also provide reassurance. It is not our task to kindle fears, but to explain the background in a way that is appropriate to children. Children’s television must contribute to forming children’s opinions. Children’s questions are completely different from those of adults. The children’s questions remain unanswered in spite of numerous special programmes for adults, because no one asks them. In a children’s programme, however, their questions must find a place.



A discussion group in *Kikania*

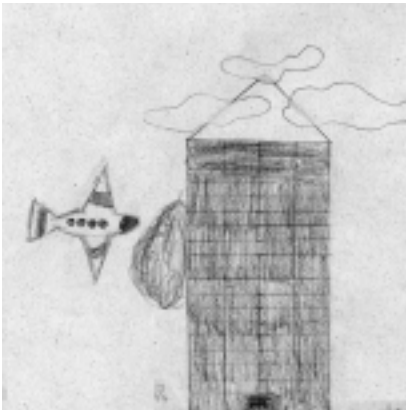
Crises not only give rise to questions, at the same time they produce a feeling of powerlessness. Children have the impression that something tragic is happening without their being able to do anything about it. There is a great risk of tragic events leaving children speechless. It is therefore necessary to try to talk to children directly. Children’s television can be a forum for young viewers’ worries and problems. Television can activate children, call on them to join in and jolt them out of their passivity. The children’s fears are strengthened by the worries of the parents, who do not know how to handle such events. There are no generally valid rules.

Nobody could have foreseen the September 11 attacks and have countered them in advance with a “catalogue of criteria” – what our children, too, had to watch with everyone else on this day was too inhuman and inconceivable. It is only natural that the parents’ first reaction is the desire to protect their children from any misfortune and to keep them away from the media. For this reason, many parents initially criticised the reporting on KI.KA on 11th September. They were mistakenly of the opinion that they could actually stop children from seeing images of the attack. After the first few hours the picture changed, and on the next day the critical voices could hardly be heard any more. Instead the parents thanked us for giving them a chance to enter into a dialogue with their children through the appropriate information. It became clear that children are confronted with attacks, crises and wars whether their parents want them to be or not. When all the channels for adults change their programmes we have to assume that children cannot avoid the images. Even if parents can stop them watching television, they will be confronted with them at school next day at the latest.

For the Children’s Channel of ARD and ZDF it is therefore an important part of our programme remit to be prepared for such events.

We have built up structures which make it possible for us to react on an ad hoc basis to dramatic events. For KI.KA several principles apply to reporting on crises:

1. The Children’s Channel of ARD and ZDF has positioned itself as a



A child's drawing on the events of 11th September

broadcaster which handles the subject of violence responsibly. This principle does not mean that on KI.KA all conflicts are left out. On the contrary. Handling the subject of violence responsibly makes it necessary to deal with current threats. Children have to know that violence, suffering and death are part of an armed conflict.

2. But KI.KA does not show close-up shots of human suffering. We try to tell stories which make the background to war clear without showing the atrocities.
3. The Children's Channel of ARD and ZDF endeavours to provide information appropriate to children. For fifteen years now the children's news programme *logo!* (ZDF) has proved that children can understand even complex political connections with the help of explanatory graphics.
4. It is not our task to deal with all the world's problems on children's television. What is important for a decision on a programme is its relevance for children. Public service children's television's experience and competence in providing information form a secure basis for taking decisions on topical programmes.
5. The Children's Channel of ARD and ZDF provides children with a forum for exchanging opinions. Psychologists stress that in crisis situations it is principally the chil-

dren's speechlessness that has to be overcome. KI.KA has established itself as a partner for children to talk to with its daily live broadcasts like *Kikania*². In crisis situations we receive several thousand telephone calls, faxes and e-mails a day.

6. KI.KA sorts the children's questions and has built up a network of experts who are in a position to answer these questions from children. In this respect KI.KA clearly differs from all the programmes offered by the commercial competition.
7. As the opinion-leader in children's television, KI.KA has also encouraged discussion on how children deal with the media in crisis situations. The reporting by KI.KA is strongly reflected in all the media. The exemplary function of KI.KA in handling war reporting is expressed in the comments of colleagues from press, radio and television.

Quite a few public as well as private television stations in Germany³ have produced programmes on this subject and/or requested interviews. Seventy-five articles were published about our special programmes in newspapers. "As an adult, after watching KI.KA during the day you have the feeling that you have learnt more about the war than after three evenings of CNN live." (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 26.3.2003) – "A mouthpiece for the concerns of children." (Thüringer Landeszeitung, 16.1.2003). – "Good, there's *logo!* on KI.KA. The production team is doing an excellent job." (Fernsehdienst, 18.03.2003) – "In the torrent of images these days it is especially the Children's Channel that proves its worth with its relaxed and balanced approach." (tageszeitung, 1.4.2003)

We changed programmes, took a close look at the background and supplied a forum for an exchange of views. Covering up is useless; television that shows an ideal world is out

of touch in times of crisis. A children's programme that takes its viewers seriously cannot ignore their concerns and problems. If television is children's most important medium for guidance, it has a duty in times of complete disorientation to point out directions, to listen and be a partner they can talk to. ■

Translated by Geoffrey P. Burwell



An explanatory graphic on *logo!*, the children's news programme

NOTES

¹ ARD (the Association of Public Law Broadcasting Corporations of the Federal Republic of Germany) and ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen) are the two national public service TV broadcasters in Germany.

² *Kikania* is a daily programme on the Children's Channel which consists of talk show, game show, and other entertaining elements.

³ Among them ZDF, NDR, SWR, BR, MDR, ARTE, DW, SAT.1, N24

THE AUTHOR

Frank Beckmann is Programme Manager of KI.KA, the ARD/ZDF Children's Channel, Erfurt, Germany.