

Alice Cahn

# Fun, funny, and fearless

## The importance of humour in children's television

Since August 2005, the new Cartoon Network's programming service *Tickle U* has broadcast humorous animation programmes for pre-schoolers. The weekday 2-hour block of programmes aims at fostering humour and optimism age-appropriately, and thus counterbalances demands of early childhood classroom-based education.

Cartoon Network US plays a special role in children's lives. Our content ethic "fun, funny and fearless," is not only a unique programmatic direction, it's also an amazingly accurate description of young children: they are fun, they are funny, and much to our dismay as their parents, they are relatively fearless!

The growth and changes in US-distributed media for preschool-aged children over the last 25 years or so are startling. While to our credit there are certainly more good choices across more screens, it does appear that kids in the US are watching more and enjoying it less. In our quest over the past 25 years to prove that television is a valid educational tool for young children, we seem to have gone overboard and taken much of the fun out of it. This is true not only of TV, but of early childhood classroom-based education as well. The expectation in the US that children should be reading as they enter 1<sup>st</sup> grade; that kindergarten children should be, and are, given homework; and that state-wide placement tests start as early as 2<sup>nd</sup>

grade are middle-class, public school norms that were not true here 10 years ago. Although perhaps not harmful for young children, these are tasks and skill sets that are not necessarily developmentally appropriate; and unfulfilled (and unreasonable) expectations

lead to stress amongst parents and children.

These observations, paired with our opinion that parenthood in the US over the last 20 years has morphed into a kind of competitive sport, caused us to believe that there was room in the US children's television environment for a network that complemented the academic-skills orientation of Nick Jr, Playhouse Disney and public broadcasting; room for a network that let kids be kids, that didn't push them to grow up so fast, that encouraged optimism and laughter over arithmetic and letter sounds; and actually valued laughter as something important for young children's growth and development.

We were very interested to learn the research-supported fact that humour is a sign of intelligence and based upon learning and mastery.<sup>1</sup>

Think about it. It makes sense. If you don't know enough, you don't get the joke. When our children are babies



Foto: Tickle U

*Harry and his bucket full of dinosaurs takes us to the imagination of 5-year-old Harry whose toy dinosaurs are as real as the bucket he carries them in.*

we all think they are geniuses when they laugh at the fact that we've put a sock on our hands. And you know what? They *are* geniuses! The reason they're laughing is that they know socks don't go on hands and they understand that mommy is being very silly. The more kids understand the world around them, the more they have the ability to understand the incongruities. And it's their understanding of those incongruities, those twists on reality, that make them laugh. At Cartoon Network, we think making kids laugh and making them happy is an important part of helping them grow and learn. We use the importance of humour as our curricular foundation.

### Guidelines for producers

These are our goals in working with producers to create or acquire new screen-based material:

- Create a playful, secure and safe screen(s)-based environment where humour can thrive.
- Support the development of a positive and joyous sense of humour in both boys and girls.
- Discourage the use and endorsement of hostile humour, violent humour or humour that is based upon disparagement.
- Model parental support of free, unstructured playtime as a significant component in child development

To help us accomplish those goals, we keep in mind three simple rules:

1. A successful funny moment is one that is understood by the audience.
2. Not all humour is funny to all audiences. Adult brains are very different from children's brains. Therefore, adult humour may not work for children. And children's humour often will not entertain adults.
3. Adults who produce media for children need a working knowledge of who children are and how they think in order to create programmes that are funny for children.

In developing and programming for younger children on Cartoon Network, we stress the use of both behavioural and verbal humour in order to appeal to both boys and girls. Behavioural humour includes characters that make funny faces, or engage in gentle and good-natured slapstick and other typical clowning behaviours. Verbal humour includes jokes and witticisms that can be repeated with friends, but also silly situations that arise from real-life comic situations. We are looking for stories that feature *both* male and female characters that initiate humour with pleasure and confidence. We also want stories that feature *both* male and female characters responding to each other's jokes with zest and delight.

### Guided by research

According to a recent Harris Poll<sup>2</sup>, most parents want their children to have a sense of humour, but aren't sure how to foster it. Some of the key findings are:

- Virtually all parents believe that a sense of humour is important for adults (99%) and important for their child (97%);
- When asked to rate the importance of various life skills, parents rated humour just as highly as reading and writing skills;
- More than half of parents (60%) would like to help their kids have a sense of humour;
- More than nine out of ten parents polled say a sense of humour helps you cope with difficult situations, be a better leader, improve your quality of life – and even be a better parent.

Our review of parent polls and academic research taught us that humour is a learned skill: we can learn to create it and we can learn to appreciate it. We've read research that indicates children who learn those skills well are those who are more even-tempered, tend to lash out less verbally and physically, and have an easier time making friends.

The research also pointed out humour's role in helping us create healthy, satisfying and successful lives. In the midst of our goal-directed, achievement-oriented activities, we all need time to enjoy what we have mastered. At Cartoon Network we are looking for projects that base humour squarely upon age-appropriate surprises and incongruities that tap into children's newly-mastered cognitive skills. We all enjoy the kind of humour that tests our knowledge of the world and each other – and our children enjoy it, too. We feel confident about ourselves when we can get the joke and laugh with friends and loved ones. And in the midst of our routines, a break to think differently and humorously may open up new and ex-

citing directions for even better goals. The television series and online activities featured during the weekdays on Cartoon Network are a mix of classic cartoons (*Tom & Jerry*, *Scooby-Doo* and others) and newer series (*Yoko Jakamoko Toto*, *Gerald McBoing Boing* and others) that were acquired or produced specifically to meet our goals. We will continue to grow the daypart with new series and a mix of classics; not only do the classics work for children, they encourage positive co-viewing, as many are series that parents enjoyed when they were young.

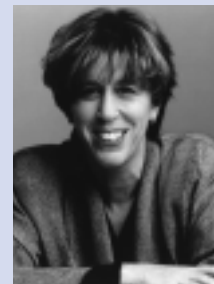
At Cartoon Network, we believe in laughter. We know that humour is a social phenomenon that facilitates friendships, learning and self-esteem – all the good things in life. We are committed to making children happy. We think it's not only fun, funny and fearless, we think it's important. ■

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For more facts we discovered about the way humour develops in children and some ideas for more reading on the subject, check out the Parents' section of our Tickle U website at [www.tickleu.com](http://www.tickleu.com).

<sup>2</sup> The nationally representative polls, conducted both by telephone and online, measure, and trend, the knowledge, opinions, behaviors and motivation of the general US public.

### THE AUTHOR



Alice Cahn, MA, is Vice President of Programming and Development for Cartoon Network's pre-school businesses. Before, she was Managing Director of the Markle Foundation, President of the Television, Film and Video group at the CTW, and Director of Children's Programming at PBS.