

Sabrina Bachmann

# “That is really not necessary!”

## Children’s television for preschoolers – what annoys parents?

**From a parental point of view, preschool programmes should show examples that help children deal with the world in a fun (and not frightening) way. Advertising as well as the scheduling and missing separation of shows are criticised.**

Today, 0- to 5-year-olds are allowed to watch television (cf. Götz et al.; in this issue), but the programme selection is still directed by the parents – and they want a pedagogically sound programme for their children. Good children’s television should be fun, informative and most of all non-violent (Götz, 2001). This is also the programme makers’ promise<sup>1</sup>: humorous shows that don’t frighten the little ones, playful learning, worlds that make you wonder, inspiration and interaction – and the parents’ wishes are considered in programme acquisition. However, there are many things about children’s television that parents are annoyed by. In August 2006, thirty-six mothers and two fathers in the Munich area (Germany) were asked what they expect from children’s television programme makers.<sup>2</sup>

### No commercials, please!

*“We very rarely watch RTL II, they show commercials non-stop.”*

Advertising in children’s programmes is repeatedly referred to as annoying. Parents believe preschool children and toddlers to be overstrained by ad-

vertising. They are said to be “much too young to understand, this is advertising and they believe anything”. What is surprising about this rejection is the wide reach of commercial networks.

About 15 % of the programming block “Toggolino” on Super RTL, which targets toddlers, is made up of advertising. However, in comparison to others, the broadcaster holds the highest market share among the 3- to 6-year-olds in Germany.<sup>3</sup>

Evidently, parents still accept the unloved advertising. Mothers are not always as strict as Ms M. who demands: “Please don’t turn on Super RTL (...) where there is this insane amount of advertising”.

### Realistic films instead of cartoons

*“... that there be less of this cartoon stuff, and more films and short films with real people.”*

Many of the interviewed parents are annoyed by cartoon formats in children’s television. The shows are perceived as being too unrealistic content-wise. In most cartoon shows parents don’t see any educational value. Especially newer formats are rated negatively, not only by Ms L.: “Doing without all the Japanese rubbish because it doesn’t make any sense to me”, while programmes that parents remember from their own childhood are often kept in fond memory:



One of the interviewed mothers with her daughters

“Things we watched as children: *Maja the Bee*, *Nils Holgersson*, (...) those old cartoons I always liked.”

In general, the affinity to realistic formats is higher, because the parents feel that their child can deal with his/her real environment this way. Very important to parents is the technical realisation of preschool programmes. Slow camera movements and few cuts are favoured. This is what most cartoons don’t offer:

“It can be animated, but maybe without the fast, gaudy, the excessive (...). If I just look at it, I think: ‘Oh my God, I’m already having a fit, imagine what the little ones think’.”

Children’s television in Germany already consisted of 60 % cartoons in 2000 (Bachmair/Hofmann, 2000). In the meantime, NICK Jr. joined the game, another channel which predominantly broadcasts in cartoon for-

mat. In this respect the development in Germany counteracts the parents' wishes.

### Good role models, please!

*"For weeks after Anne watched Cinderella she was concerned whether she was as beautiful. And she was only 4 years old!"*

Parents want their children to learn something from television in a playful way. Factual knowledge is less important than social role models for the young ones. Children's television, from a parental point of view, should not at all stress superficial values such as beauty or be cliché-ridden. Praised is the imparting of social skills, for example by Ms W. about *Barbapapa*: "There are statements in it how nice it would be to help the father." Parents also worry about the possible negative influence of cartoons that trivialise violence, where "the one hits the other one on the head and the children imitate it and, of course, they don't have the understanding when they are 3 years old to know that you shouldn't do that".

### Fun instead of fear

*"It is not necessary, this upheaval. Tom got nightmares after The Lion King and Nina slept really badly. She also wet her bed."*

Children must learn to deal with fear. Parents are aware of that. But some respondents think that children do have to deal with enough negative experiences and fears in their real environment and that television should rather serve to relax. Ms G. is sceptical, if television is the right medium to deal with difficult topics: "(...) through images that scurry over the screen". Parents fear that their children are overburdened by straining contents, especially on television, because there is not enough time to process what they see. Apart from the

content, parents are cautious of the audio-visual design of programmes. Ms T. puts it this way,

"Super RTL is at times hard to take (...), concerning the characters; they are sometimes so nasty to look at that kids just have to be afraid. Why do you have to make some characters so extremely ugly?"

The appearance of some TV characters bothers parents. Especially younger children are afraid of animals or beings that look dangerous as well as of creepy sounds (Cantor, 1998). Parents report their children sleep badly and that they have problems with what they saw. In those moments, Ms B. would love to banish television completely: "Sometimes I think, why do I put up with it, why does my child have to deal with it?"

### Placement problems and the wish for separation

*"Everything for little children is on in the morning and that does not help me at all. I would need it in the evenings past five o'clock."*

Parents find fault with the fact that the programmes for younger children are shown only in the mornings and in the evenings before *Unser Sandmännchen* (transl.: *Our Sandman*). Some – such as Ms C. – would like the preschool programme to be spread out through the day: "At noon the 'clientele' is rather the 6- to 8-year-olds, and these are simply programmes which the younger ones don't understand."

Furthermore, the parents would like to see an evening programme for children who do not go to bed directly after watching *Unser Sandmännchen*. Even more, parents want a clear separation between the individual programmes within the programming block in order to get the children accustomed to a controlled use of the medium:

"So that you can watch a programme and then say: 'okay, and now we stop here'. But children are not able to recognise the end of a programme anymore."

In spite of programme makers' efforts to offer high-quality children's television for the young ones, from the parents' perspective, there is much left to be desired. Their agenda, however, is difficult to realise: commercial-free and realistic films, evenly distributed over the day, that impart social values and are not frightening. And don't forget the breaks! Still, from the parents' perspective, who express their wishes on grounds of their responsibility for the children, those are all legitimate demands. ■

### NOTES

1 Panel discussion at the IZI conference 2006: F. Beckmann (KI.KA), R. Gerhardt (Disney Playhouse), S. Grewenig (ARD/WDR), F. Klases (Super RTL), S. Schosser (Junior TV).

2 Cf. IZI study "Functions of TV among 0,5- to 5-year-olds from a parental point of view."

3 Source: Press Office Super RTL.

### REFERENCES

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Cantor, Joanne (1998). "Mommy, I'm scared". *How TV and movies frighten children and what we can do to protect them*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Götz, Maya (2001). *Kinder- und Familienfernsehen aus Sicht der Eltern*. In: *TelevIZion*, vol. 14, nr. 1, p. 41-48.

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