

“Children in the centre”

A conversation with Jan-Willem Bult*

The main idea of my preschool documentaries is simple: To represent preschool children on television. When I started at KRO, there were only two kinds of preschool programmes in Dutch television. There were school television programmes of the kind you show in a classroom and there was *Sesame Street*. No one watches the first kind of programme at home voluntarily, and *Sesame Street* has no children in it – and if there happens to be a child it’s usually sitting next to a presenter. Just

like adults, children want to see themselves reflected on screen, but this has often not been the case. I wanted to change this and create a television policy for KRO with the motto “children in the centre”. I want to make television that comes from the hearts of the children with stories coming from the children themselves, rather than from adults who use children for their stories.

I came upon the idea for these preschool documentaries because I had a very limited budget and I wanted to create something that would last. Since I did not want to depend on one director alone, I developed a clear format with ten rules (see box).

5-year-olds and their friends

It is the 5-year-olds’ point of view. This is generally the age where children step out of their secure family

The 10 Rules

1. Children filmed are 5 years old.
2. Children lead activities themselves.
3. Parents/adults are shown in a supporting role to the child.
4. Clarify immediately who is the protagonist, what is he/she doing and where is he/she.
5. No dialogue exceeding 2 sentences, the topic of the show should be clear from the pictures alone.
6. No narration.
7. No music.
8. No words on the screen.
9. 50 % of the documentaries are to be shot in a rural setting.
10. The experiences and attitudes of the children are important, not the subject or the action of the show.

environment, especially out of their mother’s safe haven. On the one hand, 5-year-olds want to find themselves in television, while on the other hand they are already interested in slightly older children.

Show the personality

The child has the leading role, and by showing him/her involved in an activity he/she loves, we show a part of his/her personality. One principle is to have eye contact with the child. Have the camera at the child’s eye level to create more intimacy. Show the eyes or the facial expression and body expression; even if you only see the side of the face and some hair, this is where our eye is drawn.

No adults

If there are adults they should be shown in a supporting role to the

children. But why should I have to show adults at all? It is much more interesting for the preschool child to watch another preschool child alone. Even if we do include a parent, the preschooler might not even realise this. We know from research that when preschool children see children their age, they watch only the children. We could create a white background, put a preschool child in it and they would watch it and not be disturbed by the empty set.

Go straight to the point

Right from the first shot we want to see the child and the situation. This way we have more time for interaction. Still, we create the frame in which the child can be itself. And we want to know how the children do a specific thing and what they already know.

No dialogue, no narration, no music

No one explains what the story is about, in other words: there is no voice-over. The focus is on visual storytelling. Try to avoid synchronised dialogue. 5-year-olds do not talk about the world, they express themselves physically. Usually dialogue should not exceed the lines: “Get away!” and “Can I do that?”. Talking is fine, as long as you understand the story without it. Secondly,



Reika makes Sushi
(<http://www.youtube.com/kroyouth>)

it gives you an opportunity to show these films all over the world. The moment you add music you add an interpretation.

The children in the audience should be able to decide for themselves whether they find a situation sad, interesting or exciting.

50 % city, 50 % country

There should be a variety of 50 % urban and 50 % non-urban situations.

This way you will get stories from all over the country and from different children in different circumstances.

Focus on experiences, not process

How does the child experience things? What happens in the child's inner world? Take, for example, the situation: "Digging a hole". It is uninteresting to show in detailed steps how to dig a hole in a pedagogically correct way, because children already know how to dig a hole when they are five. Focus on how the child loves what it does. This way, we usually capture the moment when the child takes a step forward in his/her life.

2 minutes and 30 seconds

For me, building a format is important. This is why I have clear time requirements for the preschool documentaries. 2 minutes and 30 seconds is the right length, exact and frame-specific. Other good preschool programmes may of course be shorter or longer, such as e. g. *Piece of cake: peanut butter*.

Don't be afraid!

Since budgets are quite limited, it is challenging to allow children to act more freely during a shooting, because who knows what may happen? But you get a much better story this way.

The filming of a preschool documentary usually only takes one to one and a half hours to shoot. If you plan it thoroughly, you can shoot 3 or 4 documentaries in a day. Furthermore, it delivers material that you can run, rerun and/or exchange with other networks.

This is all built upon a strong belief in the autonomy of children. Many cultures view children as empty slates that need to be filled with knowledge and skills. I am trying to change that by saying, "No, they are already full of power, knowledge, skills, and it is up to us to create a frame in which they can develop these things".

A good example: A girl making sushi

One example I often use is a film where you see a little Japanese girl in Amsterdam who wants to make sushi. She puts a piece of salmon on a wooden plate, grabs a knife and cuts it. It is probably the sharpest knife in the hand of a preschooler ever shown on television. We adults look at the danger, because we do not trust a child with a knife. A preschool child does not look at the danger, it just looks at the challenge, like "Hey, I might be able to make sushi". It is totally safe and pedagogically well done because no child can make this without the support of the parents. We never show children who are not able to do the things they try. They are never in danger and nobody was ever hurt. When people tell me I should show the child's parents or say "Don't try this at home," I always say, "Yes! Try this at home!".

With this example of Reika, the little Japanese girl, adults can put themselves in the position of a preschool child. Don't think of the danger, but look at it as a great challenge. So when a parent complains, "Now our child wants to do it, too," I say, "You should not blame me. People complain about couch-potatoes, but your child is encouraged and engaged by television. That is the best compliment you can give me. This is exactly what I want."



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