

Eureka! – That's quality!

Flashes of inspiration concerning quality in children's television

Programme managers and producers from Northern Europe and New York, who, for years, have assured a high level of quality in children's television, talk about their key moments, their Eureka! experiences, as well as about what they think is quality in children's TV, and how this affects their work.



Children in the middle of their world: son taking apart a dishwasher

Put the child and its competences in the middle

Jan-Willem Bult (KRO, Hilversum)

(e.g. *Baking a cake*, Adriaan, Genji)



My Eureka! moment was not a children's programme. It happened when my son was 5 years old, and our dishwasher was broken. I put it in the garden and because he was always interested in mechanics, I gave him my toolbox and said: "Take it apart, do whatever you want!" So he took the screwdrivers out and started to unscrew and totally rip the dishwasher. And I took my camera out and I filmed it. Some friends from the neighbourhood came and I saw what happened between the kids.

Their eyes got excited, full of concentration, passionate, there was quarrelling, they were going to get that screw... They totally unscrewed the dishwasher and sorted its components: the little screws together – the

little wires together – the big tubes together... I thought: This is in the middle of a children's world. If I can catch this on tape and show this to other kids who were not there, they will be as excited as those that were there.

After a couple of hours he cut his fingers and it started to bleed, so we put a plaster on it. Beautiful shots of a very concentrated child, with his little eyes looking at a screw with a little plaster on his finger. The film is about learning by falling down once in a while, hurting yourself a little bit without being in danger, that's life. It is a chance for children to discover themselves by getting in touch with their talents and their inner worlds. And that's how television for children should be as well. To reach this level of quality you have to place the child in the middle, not us adults trying to make them tell our story, but children in the middle of their world in control of what they are doing.

I'm not talking about an ethnographic 1:1 recording. It is about capturing the story from the child's perspective and professionally making the best out

of it. It is about finding the shots that are already speaking for themselves. A typical adult approach is to make the pictures speak by adding a lot of music, sound effects and voice-over or by shooting a lot of pictures and using them to tell the producer's story. The most important thing is not to sit behind your desk and invent a story for preschool children. You must live in the middle of those children, listen to them, observe them very well and try to put all these things together into a story. Generally, that is not the way most people work with or for children. When we work with children we are afraid of them. But it's the same with everything on TV: when television is based on fear nothing good comes out of it.

You can find the same in programme scheduling. Often people say something like: "We want to be an alternative to the commercial channels." Often the fear of losing an audience or not being watched is driving the schedules. This is a market approach and not a mission. As public broadcasters we should know that we are not alone in this world, so we do it as

good as possible in the context of this world. But instead of counter-scheduling soaps against soaps, let's find out how high quality dramas work: better, especially in a world "with a lot of the same programmes"! Instead of copying the same genres, instead of inventing new ones, let's focus on a mission we believe in. What I did in my preschool programme was breaking all the rules by putting in a lot of slow-paced single shows not always at a strict schedule – and it worked. It worked because I was focussed on the contact with the audience. I didn't do what we know works, but improved our own way. I accepted that the things we did were not good enough. Something I understood, when I gave the toolbox into the hands of the kids and they didn't need me anymore. And that's what quality in children's television is: endless trust and dependence on children!

Don't avoid problematic topics, but try and see them through children's eyes

Ragna Wallmark (UR, Sweden)
(e.g. *Speak up; Ready, steady, grow*)



My first Eureka! moment: I learnt to understand the importance of the perspective of the child when my son and his best friend, both around 6 years old, were playing with Lego and while working hard on a castle they were telling each other about a family picnic we had had together a few days earlier. I was eavesdropping on them and what I heard was the story of quite a different picnic than the one I had been at! They had experienced and seen things that I as a grown-up had not. A true lesson in child's perspective! I ripped a script to pieces and have since then always consulted children before making any children's programmes. Good children's television gives children a voice! The second Eureka! experience on

what quality in children's TV means is a sad one: One morning a mother of a 6-year-old girl phoned me, she was very upset, and my first thought was that she had complaints about our programmes. But this was the story she told: "I found my daughter in front of the television watching a children's programme, and I thought: 'Gosh! This is NOT something I want her to watch.'" Apparently there had been a film about sexual abuse and now a psychologist was talking to older kids about the film. My daughter looked at me and said 'The lady told that no one is allowed to touch you if you don't want them to, if someone does you have to tell.', and then she started to cry. That was how I found out what was going on at her school." This left me with a feeling that if this little girl had been the one and only viewer watching the programme it would have been worth the effort. She understood that she was not the only child in the world experiencing this, that it was not her fault, and that she could do something about it. The impact of television can sometimes be vital. Life is a challenge when you are 9 years old: you see and experience things that can be both scary and hard to understand. Grown-ups sometimes tend to think, or hope, that children are unaffected by the unhappy sides of life. But of course they are not. Violence is part of most children's everyday life, violence at home, in school, in their communities, and in the world. Being a child is feeling afraid a lot. Children's culture must of course reflect on this. No matter how difficult a subject is, there is always a child's perspective. Basically, quality in children's programmes does not differ from quality in adult programmes. Good quality children's programmes, with their obvious children's perspective, their respect for the child, and their readiness to show the capacity of children, raises the status of the audience both in their own eyes and in the eyes of the world around them. It can be short

and simple, it can be humorous, entertaining, educational, or everything in one. But always, always told from a child's perspective, and this implies a total solidarity with the child. Children shall be seen in, participate in, and make their voices heard in the programmes.

I have met people from all over the world who work with children's television and they are often passionate people, devoted to their audiences. But ever so often frustrated because of lack of resources to produce the programmes they know children need. I have had the privilege to work for public service in the Nordic countries where children's programming has a strong position within the companies. But this status does not come for free, over the years we have had a constant struggle within our companies in order to be able to give our audience what they deserve – that is: the best! So keep fighting for high-quality children's programmes.

Children's TV with real children in leading roles

Kalle Frst (NRK, Norway, now: Nordic Film)

(e.g. *Children's supershow, Linus and his friends, The gift*)

When I started as a director of youth programmes in 1969, I was strongly influenced by the 1968 students' revolution. The same year my son was born - and in the next years I observed with interest when he watched television. It was not puppets, cartoons, or adults playing children that fascinated him - but when there were other children on the screen. He was my Eureka! moment – so when I started making children's programmes in 1974, I had a strong desire to create something different from the traditional children's TV. I wanted to make television that showed real kids – kids in everyday situations, kids in happiness and in sorrow –, and I did this by making a docudrama where my 6-year-old son played the lead. I was

inspired by observing what he wanted to watch.

Through this series came the mantra that would influence my following work: focus on the child. Looking at children as “humans-to-be” is based on the idea that children are passive receivers and childhood is only a preparation for adulthood – that’s the old way. Viewing children as “human beings” is about seeing them as independent

creatures with their own inherent value. Today children play the lead roles, both in drama series and magazine shows. In order to take children as “human beings” seriously, we have to present children and adults from the same point of view – and not from the adults’ elevated angle. Children are given roles where their opinions, wishes, and suggestions carry weight. Children should be encouraged and given the opportunity to accomplish as much as possible on their own. By demonstrating that children “can do”, they encourage other children to accomplish – and to try and achieve. Our programmes should be like a workshop in self-confidence.

- To be visible – means you exist.
- To be asked – means you are important.
- To be given a space in the media – means you have a place in society.

Children’s supershow became a great success with the children’s audiences – and in the international television world as well –, for example by winning the prestigious Japan Prix award. *Linus in svingen* (*Linus in the bend*) and *Christmas in svingen* (*Christmas in the bend*) are the first two children’s drama series from Norway that have been sold for dubbing to other countries. They went to Germany, Holland, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark



Kalle Furst with his grandchildren: show real kids

– where they were dubbed into the respective languages. That makes me pretty proud!

Everything matters

Josh Selig (*Little Airplane Productions, USA*)
(e.g. *The wonder pets!*, *3rd & bird!*, *Tobi!*)



Making quality children’s television is not unlike cooking a quality meal. You need a great cook, a great recipe, fresh ingredients, and, perhaps most importantly, you need to know who’s coming to dinner. It does no good to prepare a beautiful steak au poivre for a table full of vegans. Just as a great meal depends on how all these elements come together, a great show depends on seamless communication between every creative department. In a world of global treaties, co-productions, and tax incentives this kind of communication has become as rare as Brazilian tree frogs. I first witnessed great children’s TV while working on *Sesame street*. I was a shy 24-year-old writer and I was on the set observing my first “Muppet Day”. We were taping a segment that featured

Frank Oz playing Cookie Monster. I remember watching and listening and having the conscious thought: “There is nothing they could be doing better.” The sets and the lighting were exquisite, the script was hysterical, and even the fur on Cookie Monster was being groomed by a “Muppet Wrangler”. Everything mattered. I tried very hard to replicate this type of creative integrity and attention to detail

when I started *Little Airplane*. But I also took a page from the extraordinary Nick Jr. Research Department, led by Dr. Alice Wilder. During my term as head writer on Nick Jr.’s *Little bill*, I was introduced to formative research testing, which is to say, getting feedback from kids during the script phase and *before* the show went into production. “Ah-hah!”, I thought. “So this is how they know who’s coming to dinner!”

At *Little Airplane*, we now have all our departments in-house. Everything from writing to research to music to animation is done in our studios in New York and London. This helps us ensure that the final result is our best possible effort. Anything less, I believe, would be an affront to our clients, our partners and, more importantly, to the young children and families who watch our shows. So, in many ways, *Little Airplane Productions* is a kitchen where we cook up tasty little shows like *Go, baby!* or our new series, *Tobi!* as well as our big five-course meals like *The wonder pets!* and *3rd & bird!* And we sincerely hope that our dishes will not only be healthy but will also be irresistibly delicious to parents and children alike.

Bon appetite! ■