



Current Research on Children and the Media

Why It Matters...

Diversity on Television

Introduction

When Sesame Street debuted in 1969, children were not only introduced to a variety of furry, lovable creatures and a plethora of numbers and letters, but also to a cast of racially diverse characters who lived in the neighborhood. By modeling diversity, Sesame Street helped pave the way for other shows to follow suit, and today there are many children's programs that reflect the rich ethnic and racial diversity of the world in which we live.

Yet the diversity that young people often see in children's programming during the day and on Saturday mornings is not regularly found at other times, especially prime time, the most popular viewing time for children. The dearth of such diversity has strong implications for television's youngest viewers. According to Children Now research, youth of all races want to see people like themselves on television. Because children, on average, spend almost three hours a day watching television, the messages they receive about themselves and their place in the world have great significance.

This issue of Media Now highlights research on entertainment media images of race and class and the impact it can have on children's sense of

themselves and their place in the world. As today's children grow up in a more multicultural society than those in the past, increasing diverse images on television makes both good business and social sense.

Present Climate of Diversity on Television

Prime Time Programming

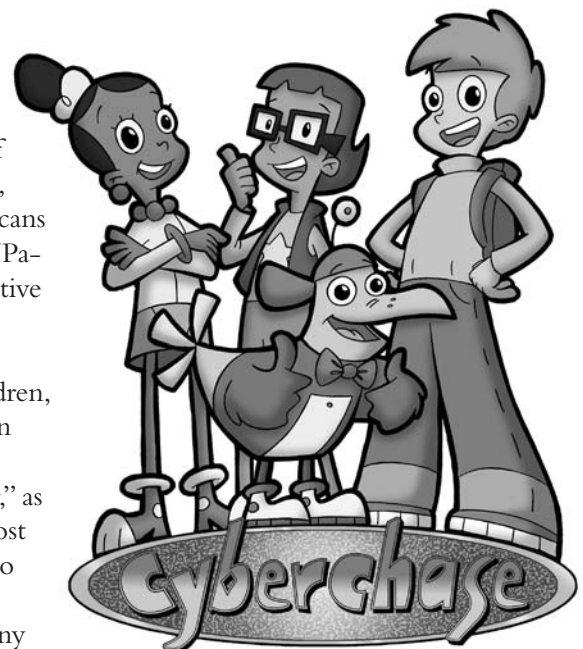
Children watch television during prime time more than any other time of day (Nielsen Media Research, 2000). Yet according to Children Now's study *Fall Colors 2001-02*, prime time remains overwhelmingly white, with people of color appearing largely in secondary and guest roles. Whites account for 73% of the prime time population, followed by African Americans (16%), Latinos (4%), Asian/Pacific Islanders (3%) and Native Americans (.2%).

More than 10 million children, on average, watch television from 8 to 9 o'clock in the evening. The "family hour," as it has been called, is the most popular time for children to watch television, yet it remains the least diverse of any

hour in all of prime time. *Fall Colors 2001-02* found that prime time diversity dramatically increases as the evening progresses, with the 8:00 hour being the least racially diverse, and the 10:00 hour being the most racially diverse. Thus, children and youth tend to see a much more homogenous prime time world than do adults who watch television later in the evening.

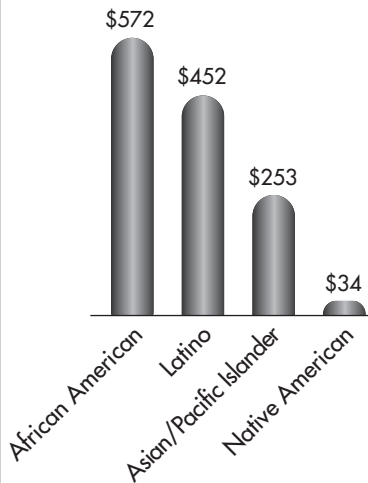
Children's Programming

In contrast, children's programming portrays a fairly colorful world. According to Donna Friedman, executive vice president of



Cyberchase, PBS

MINORITY SPENDING POWER IN THE U.S. (IN BILLIONS)



Source: "Buying Power at the Beginning of a New Century: Projections for 2000 and 2001," University of Georgia, September 7, 2000.

Estimated Annual Spending Power of Youth:

Age	\$ Spent
4-12 years old	\$122 billion
12-19 years old	\$155 billion

Sources: "Children's Ads Creating a Craving," Buffalo News, April 4, 2000; Teenage Research Unlimited.

operations at the WB network children's programming division, "Kids expect programming that's directed at them. They want shows that feature characters who are just like them, and they aspire to be just like those characters" (*New York Daily News*, April 7, 2002).

Several broadcast and cable networks have created programs that feature a variety of diverse characters. *The Famous Jett Jackson* on the Disney Channel features an ethnically diverse and inter-generational cast while telling the story of a famous African American child actor trying to maintain a normal lifestyle. *Static Shock*, a successful Warner Brothers animated series, portrays the first African American teenage superhero, Virgil Hawkins, who confronts the pressures of growing up in an ethnically diverse urban neighborhood. *Cyberchase*, an animated adventure series on PBS, brings African American, Latino and Caucasian cultures together in the multiracial cast of Jackie, Inez and Matt while teaching math skills. Nickelodeon's *Dora the Explorer* features a seven year-old Latina heroine who uses her knowledge of English and Spanish to communicate with her friends, overcome obstacles and reach her goals.

Despite the diversity in children's programming, there continues to be room for improvement. In its 1999 *State of Children's Television* report, the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that 40% of children's programming on network and cable channels had no diversity, while 32% had "a little" and 28% contained "a lot." In 2001, Tufts University Professors Calvin Gidney and Julia Dobrow found

that 70 to 80 percent of lead characters on children's programs in the 1996-97 season were either Anglo or Nordic. Citing older shows such as *The Flintstones*, Gidney acknowledges that "the newer shows are much more diverse and inclusive, but there needs to be more" (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 5, 2001).

Why Diversity Matters

There is ample evidence that media do affect children's cultural attitudes. One theory, known as the social learning theory, posits that children learn about themselves and the world around them from observing others. Therefore, their attitudes and behav-

"Children's shows are not just about white faces anymore. It's great to have a role model, someone of your own color."

—Linda Steiner, Senior Vice President, Warner Brothers Animation

iors can be influenced by simply viewing televised material (Dorr, 1982). An extensive review of the research on television's effects found that there was evidence of social learning among African Americans, Cambodians, Chinese Americans, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cubans, Hmongs, Japanese, Laotians, Latinos, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and whites. In addition, there was no evidence that this process of learning differed in any substantial way among any of these groups (Dorr, 1982).

But social learning theory also states that television's influence is moderated by viewers' own needs, interests, abilities, motivations and self-concepts (Graves, S. B., 1993). So while television has the potential to affect the attitudes of children of all races, it is helpful to look specifically at the unique ways that television influences both minority group and majority group children's attitudes toward other racial groups, their own racial group and themselves.

Learning about Me

Most research on the effects of television diversity focuses on the way that portrayals of people of color, or the lack thereof, affect the self-concept and self-esteem of children of color. This research indicates that the relative absence of non-white characters sends children of color the message that they are not an important part of society.

According to a 1998 Children Now poll, children of all races agree that it is important to see people of their own race on television because:

- It tells children that people of their race are important (84%);
- It makes children of that race feel included (81%); and
- It provides role models (78%).

Due to the near-invisibility of characters of color (and the often negatively stereotyped portrayals when they do appear), children of color who consume large amounts of television have been found to have

low self-concepts, to feel alienated and to be uninterested in participating in activities outside of their immediate communities (Palmer, Taylor, Smith, and Strawser, 1993). This impact on identity development can be especially strong for Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander and Native American children, who almost never see people who look like them on television. Children in these and other under-represented groups can receive a strong, clear message that the majority culture does not value or respect them (Huntemann and Morgan, 2001).

According to Children Now research, children receive strong messages about race from television. As one African American boy explained, "People are inspired by what they see on television. If they do not see themselves on TV, they want to be someone else." In a national poll conducted by Children Now, children were asked to name the television celebrities they look up to the most. White and African

Weekly TV Viewing Habits of Children Ages 2-18 by Race

African American:

3 hrs. 56 minutes

Latino:

3 hrs. 31 minutes

White:

2 hrs. 22 minutes

Source: Kids & Media @The New Millennium, Kaiser Family Foundation, November 1999.

American children, who have a broad selection of television personalities from their own racial group from which to choose, picked nearly all actors from their respective groups. However, Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander children, who did not have many same-group television role models to choose from, picked almost all African American personalities (Children Now, 1998).

Another study showed that exposure to characters of their own racial group, especially in racially integrated settings, led to positive racial attitudes in children of color (Graves, S. H., 1975; as cited in Graves, S. B., 1993). However, exposure to same-group characters in prime time programs (when diversity is less common and characters of color are often stereotyped) resulted in minority characters expressing negative attitudes toward their own racial group (Dorr, Graves and Phelps, 1980). Finally, children's attitudes toward their racial group have even been positively influenced by commercials that feature members of their own group. What's more, children prefer to watch these commercials (Barry and Hansen, 1973).



Malcolm in the Middle, FOX

Learning about Others

Children of all races seem to be influenced by television's portrayals of people from other racial groups. Research has shown that simply seeing characters of color on television results in positive attitude changes for white children (Dorr, Graves and Phelps, 1980), especially if they are shown in a multiracial setting (Graves, S. H., 1975; as cited in Graves, S. B., 1993). In addition, white, Latino and Native American children all increased their acceptance of other racial group members after viewing a positive, racially integrated television program (Mays, Henderson, Seidman and Steiner, 1975; as cited in Graves, S. B., 1993).

Television's effect on children's attitudes and beliefs was illustrated clearly in a series of Children Now focus groups with young people ages 10 to 17. When asked to cast television roles

from a collection of photographs of diverse people, children had very definite ideas of what a "good" person and a "bad" person looked like. After choosing an African American for the part of a criminal, one white boy said, "he just looks like the type of criminal that would probably steal or something." Children who chose a Latino for the criminal role explained it was because he "looked mean" or "like he could kill someone." When casting a white person

for the part of a police officer, one African American boy stated that he did so because "he looks intelligent" (Children Now, 1998).

Conclusion

The youth generation is growing up in a much more diverse landscape, with more people of color than at any other time in the history of the United States. Children Now research found that 75% of children surveyed had best friends of different races. Despite this and other research that shows how well children of all backgrounds respond to diverse programming on television, there has yet to be a more visible display of characters of color.

Racially diverse programming can help teach children how to get along in our multicultural world and can help children learn to value and respect people who belong to racial groups other than

their own. It also presents an opportunity for the industry as they focus on the youth market and develop loyal consumers who are growing up in an increasingly diverse world. Given the rate of projected growth for children of color in the United States, their increasing purchasing power and research that shows media do affect children's cultural attitudes, it is clear that programming with multiracial casts makes both good business and social sense.

"Of all the various types of media, it is television that will, in one new form or another, continue to exercise a major influence related to the way we see ourselves and others in a growing culturally diverse country."

—Dr. Gordon Berry
Professor Emeritus, UCLA

RECOMMENDATIONS for Improving Diversity in Programming

- Include people of color in leading roles
- Represent people of color in positive, non-stereotypical ways
- Show characters interacting in personal and professional settings, not only with people of their own racial group
- Cast people of color in a variety of occupations including management, education, business and other positions of prestige
- Balance portrayals of different ethnicities in negative roles such as a criminal, comedic sidekick or cheater.

Source: Children Now, 1998; Children Now, 2001.



Static Shock, The Kids' WB

Why Not Diversity?

By Herb Scannell, President, Nickelodeon

Over the past few years, Nickelodeon has been cited for the diverse television screen it presents to its kid audience. That recognition is what I have been most proud of in all my years as a television programmer.

One of the questions we are frequently asked by the media and the advocacy community is why we've been able to present a more diverse screen when other networks are often criticized for their lack of diversity. I can only speak for Nickelodeon when I say that it really boils down to our core mission of serving all kids. While Nickelodeon is by definition a niche network, we actually seek to serve and attract the broadest audience possible within the universe of kids 2-14 years old. That means putting kids from all different backgrounds front and center: kids of all shapes, sizes and, most importantly, color.

For years we have tried to dispel some of the conventional wisdom of kids' tele-

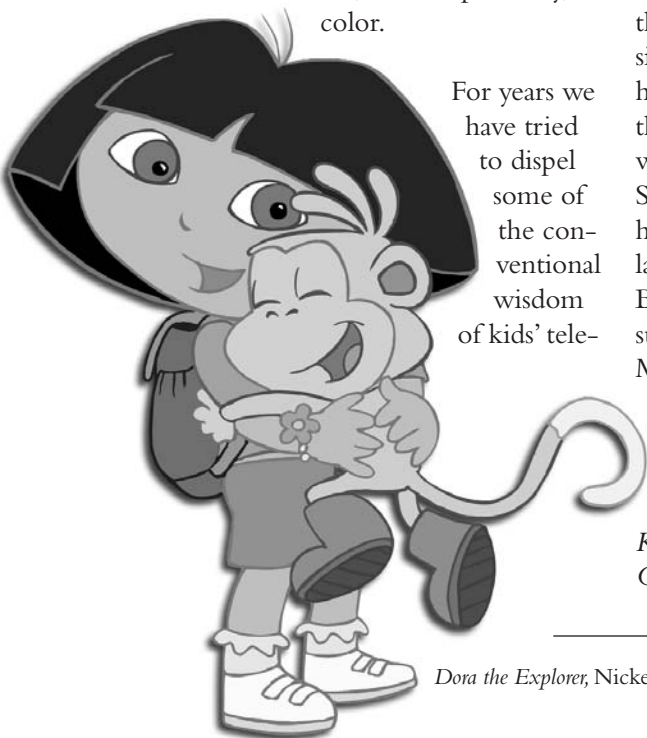
vision. During the early 1990s we made a conscious decision to develop shows that put girls in lead roles. The prevailing thought at the time was that boys would not watch shows starring girls, but girls would watch shows starring boys. *Clarissa Explains it All*, which starred Melissa Joan Hart, blew that myth out of the water. Half of the audience for the show was boys, and more than half of Melissa's fan mail came from boys. With the success of *Clarissa* we were encouraged to try to continue to challenge the status quo of kids' TV.

In addition to airing more shows that featured girls as stars, we broadened our search for talented creators and stars that would give us the key to our success: great characters and stories. One excuse often cited in explaining the lack of diversity on television is that the talent pool is limited. Well, I guess that's true if you swim in the same size pool everyday. We wanted to have our shows reflect the world that today's kids live in, and that is a world rich with cultural diversity. So we sought talent where others hadn't, in cities like Chicago, Atlanta, San Francisco and Orlando. By doing this we came across stars such as Kenan Thompson and Kel Mitchell, two young African American comedians who first were featured on our sketch comedy series, *All That*, and later broke out as major stars in their own series *Kenan & Kel*, and their own movie, *Good Burger*. We also proactively

pursued Asian American talent and cast Irene Ng as the star of *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*.

Most recently we have tried to expand the presence of Latino creators and actors on our screen. *The Brothers Garcia*, *Taina* and *Dora the Explorer* were the results of a conscious effort to again find new voices with great stories to tell for kids. Jeff Valdez and Maria Perez Brown, the creators of *The Brothers Garcia* and *Taina*, came from different cultural backgrounds with which they enrich their shows, but also tell stories that have universal kid themes. Again, the key is great characters and stories.

One of the other oft-cited excuses people make for not having a diverse screen are the business pressures, i.e. ratings and advertising sales. We believe that being good for kids is good for business, and that diversity is good for kids. If you want a business case for diversity, look no further than Nickelodeon. We have been the number one rated network in cable for six straight years, and I believe strongly that the diversity on our screen has been a big reason for that success. Kids are comfortable with diversity. It is in their lives everyday. As the generation watching Nickelodeon today grows up, they may have higher expectations of TV networks. And if some become the programmers of tomorrow, I'm sure we'll be seeing more diverse TV screens on all networks.



Dora the Explorer, Nickelodeon



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About Children Now

Children Now is a research and action organization dedicated to assuring that children grow up in economically secure families, where parents can go to work confident that their children are supported by quality health coverage, a positive media environment, a good early education and safe, enriching activities to do after school. Recognized for its expertise in media as a tool for change, Children Now designs its strategies to improve children's lives while at the same time helping America build a sustained commitment to putting children first. Children Now is an independent, nonpartisan organization.

The Children & the Media Program was established in 1993. Our goal is to improve the quality of media for children and about children's issues.

Media Now serves as a link between academia and the entertainment and advertising communities.

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