



4 / Television and Social Reality

As a parent, I have feared both that my children were *not* learning from television and that they were. On the one hand, it is only natural to want your children to get something constructive out of the long hours spent in front of the television. On the other hand, I have serious doubts about the content of many programs and therefore hope that the children have not absorbed it. Many of my fears center on television's messages about the nature of the social world: what different kinds of people are like and how they act toward each other. Some parents may feel more in harmony with the social reality that is projected on television than I do. Television in other countries may be presenting different views of the social world. In many countries, the issue may be the importation of a foreign social reality that comes with buying American or British television. In order to cope with any of these situations, it is important to know how children interpret and use the social messages presented on television.

SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES

The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that television does influence children's views of social reality.¹

One effect it can have is to encourage stereotyped opinions about social topics such as sex roles. Content analysis of TV programming in the United States has shown that television generally presents highly stereotyped views of male and, particularly, female roles, and studies indicate that, as early as age three, heavy television viewers in the United States have more stereotyped views of sex roles than do light viewers.² Children simply learn what is presented on U.S. television—sex role stereotypes. The conclusions of George Gerbner, a pioneer in the analysis of the social world portrayed on U.S. television, have been summarized this way: "Male prime-time characters out-number females by 3 to 1 and, with a few exceptions, women are portrayed as weak, passive satellites to powerful effective men. TV's male population also plays a vast variety of roles, while females generally get typecast as either lovers or mothers. Less than 20% of TV's married women with children work outside the home—as compared with more than 50% in real life."³ Analysis of British television yields the same conclusions.⁴

Commercials are outstanding culprits in the presentation of sex role stereotypes. In an experiment, one group of high school girls was shown fifteen commercials emphasizing the importance of physical beauty, while another group was not shown the commercials. The girls who watched the commercials were more likely than the others to agree with the statements "beauty is personally desirable for me" and "beauty is important to be popular with men."⁵ However, to put this effect in perspective, it should be noted that television, even without commercials (for example, in Britain twenty-five years ago and in Sweden today), influences children to attach more importance to appearance in general and clothes in particular.⁶ This seems to be the effect of tele-

vision being a visual medium, even without any effort to sell physical beauty.

It is not just beauty commercials that use sexual stereotypes to sell products. Researchers at the University of Kansas have investigated what clusters of features commercials associate with toys intended for boys versus those intended for girls. Commercials for girls' toys contain more fades, dissolves, and background music; those for boys' toys contain more toy action, frequent cuts, sound effects, and loud music. The researchers created pseudo-commercials consisting of abstract shapes rather than real toys and containing one or the other of these clusters of features and showed them to children of various ages. Children of all ages tended to identify the features from commercials for girls' toys as female and those from commercials for boys' toys as male, and this identification got stronger with age.⁷ This is an example of the way recurrent formats, which I discussed in Chapter 2, set up expectations that affect children's response to new material. In this instance, the format is being used to track girls toward certain types of merchandise, boys toward other types, without ever bringing the message of sex-typing to the level of explicit verbal awareness.

Television can do more than reinforce stereotypes. It is so powerful a medium that with careful planning it can also be used to break down social stereotypes. The best example here is *Freestyle*, a series produced for U.S. public television with the express purpose of changing sex-role attitudes in nine- through twelve-year-old children. In thirteen half-hour segments, the show presented dramatized vignettes in which girls came to see that they could be independent and career-minded in traditionally male fields, and in which boys learned to be nurturant and to express emotions. The goal was to

produce more acceptance of and interest in nontraditional work and family roles, such as scientific, mechanical, and athletic activities for girls, nurturant activities for boys.⁸

The series was successful in a number of respects. First of all, it attracted an audience. According to Nielsen ratings, it was watched in 1,640,000 homes. Although this was only 5.5 percent of households with children aged six to eleven, the absolute numbers indicate television's impressive ability to reach people.

To test the effects of *Freestyle*, researchers studied more than seven thousand children in seven U.S. cities. Some of the children watched the show at home; each week their teachers reminded them to do so. Others viewed the show in their classrooms. For still others, teachers introduced each episode and followed it up with class discussion and activities drawn from a teacher's guide.

The children who watched at home saw the show much less often than the other groups (although much more often than if they had not been encouraged by their teachers). Not surprisingly, the effects were smallest in this group. The show had a stronger effect on the group that viewed the program at school; for instance, more children came to believe that husbands are capable of doing housework and that traditionally female jobs such as secretary and nurse are held by men as well as women. While the effects of simply viewing *Freestyle* were already considerable, they were both intensified and expanded when the show was discussed in class. For example, just watching the show convinced female students that it is good for boys to assume helping roles like housework and child care; but it took classroom discussion to convince male students.

The experience of *Freestyle* indicates the potential, thus far exploited only to a very limited degree in the United States, for using television to help children expand their

image of different groups in society. It also points up the capacity for classroom discussion to magnify the learning impact of a television program; and it demonstrates the benefits of bringing television into the classroom. The overwhelming majority of teachers were enthusiastic about using the program in their classes. This reaction is one indication that it is indeed feasible to integrate television in the school curriculum.

It is a sad commentary on the U.S. system of support for broadcasting that *Freestyle*, a program that has proved its value in both systematic research and audience interest, has not been continued in production and is, as of now, being broadcast in only one city in the United States, Pittsburgh. At the same time, children are being exposed every day to a heavy diet of sex-role stereotypes on commercial television.

Not all commercial TV shows portray sex-role stereotypes; the right kind of commercial programming can counter such stereotypes. An experimental study was done involving *All in the Family*, an adult comedy series that also attracted a large audience among children.⁹ The central character, Archie Bunker, is a very opinionated, traditional, and prejudiced working-class man. The study used an episode about some neighbors of the Bunkers who had nontraditional sex roles: Frank, the husband, did the cooking; Irene, the wife, fixed household appliances. Children between the ages of five and eleven watched the show in small groups and were interviewed about sex-role concepts before and after viewing. Above age five, children decreased their stereotyping as a result of seeing the program. This effect was larger if an adult made comments about the program during natural pauses, such as "Look, Irene fixed Edith's mixer all by herself" or "There's Frank cooking. He seems to really like cooking."

Two important facts emerge from this study. First,

with the right content, a humorous, entertaining, and adult program can effectively counter the prevailing view of the social world presented on U.S. commercial television. Second, commentary on a program by an adult can magnify impact of the program on the child. These are the same basic points that emerged from the study of *Freestyle*. An important implication of this investigation of *All in the Family* is that education is not limited to educational programming; entertainment programming can also educate in important ways.

A similar study was done in England with a children's show called *Rainbow*.¹⁰ Like the *All in the Family* episode, the *Rainbow* show presented a story that included a family in which traditional sex roles were reversed. As in the U.S. study, viewing the program moved attitudes toward less traditional sex role concepts, particularly increased acceptance of male participation in housework.

However, as attitudes solidify with age, such changes become more difficult to bring about. Prejudiced adults identify with and find support for their views in Archie Bunker, the bigot, while liberals see the series as an exposé of prejudiced thinking.¹¹ For adults, *All in the Family* confirms preexisting attitudes, no matter what these are; the show's power to influence its audience in a new direction seems lost.

MINORITY GROUPS

Several studies have shown that TV can be used to enhance the self-respect of children who are members of an oppressed group. For example, research on *Sesame Street*, which portrays characters from various minority groups in a positive, nonstereotyped way, showed that minority children who watched the program gained in cultural pride, self-confidence, and interpersonal co-

operation.¹² Television may also have a positive effect on the way members of disadvantaged groups are viewed by members of the advantaged majority. After watching *Sesame Street* for two years, white children in the United States developed more positive views toward children of other races; in Canada, special multiracial inserts added to regular *Sesame Street* shows have had a similar effect.¹³

Television in the United States usually portrays members of racial minorities as less powerful and poorer than the majority.¹⁴ Every day, as both minority and majority children digest the typical American television fare, the image of minorities as relatively powerless and poor becomes internalized by children of all groups. In accord with the general principle that children identify with powerful figures rather than with powerless ones, black children often model themselves after white rather than black characters in a show.¹⁵ This process, occurring in a racist society, can cause an identity conflict: how to have the status of a white person without ceasing to identify psychologically with one's own group? Television did not create this psychological problem, which stems from the oppression of minority groups. But by presenting an image of different groups in society that reflects the status quo, television helps to perpetuate this identity problem for minority children.

Disabled children make up another type of disadvantaged group whose self-image is affected by television. In Sweden a number of children's programs for and about deaf and hard-of-hearing children were produced. After watching these shows, "children with normal hearing acquired a keen interest in deaf and hard-of-hearing children, and a greater understanding of them, and they found it exciting to try to express themselves in the deaf children's secret sign language. The self-confidence of the deaf and hard-of-hearing children increased noticeably, in that they received appreciative

attention from other children, saw others in the same situation as their own, and suddenly could understand the programs better." In the United States, *Sesame Street* has also produced benefits by presenting handicapped children in a realistic and positive light.¹⁶

Television can be a powerful tool for improving children's images of the groups that make up a pluralistic society. We have the choice of using the medium in this way or using it to reinforce negative stereotypes, as is far too often the case in current programming in the United States.

IMAGES OF OTHER COUNTRIES

The power of television can also be used to give children a positive image of life in other parts of the world. In the United States, ITT produced a series called *The Big Blue Marble*, aimed at children from eight to fourteen and designed to show positive attributes of children around the world. In an investigation of the program's effects, children were tested before and after viewing four episodes. After watching the episodes, children saw children in other countries as happier and better off, and were less likely to say that children from their own country were more fun, more interesting, more intelligent, and so forth. They also saw more similarity in people around the world. *The Big Blue Marble* also led to the world's largest pen pal program, a real-world testimony to the program's effects.¹⁷

Similar reductions in ethnocentric attitudes were observed in England twenty-five years ago when the BBC produced programs such as *Children's International Newsreel*, designed to inform children about other countries.¹⁸ The reduction of national ethnocentrism is of great importance as the fate of one country becomes ever more interconnected with that of others. The communications

revolution has been one factor in turning our planet into what McLuhan termed "the global village." We can enhance the chances for survival of that village by using the media of communication, such as television, to improve our information about other countries, thus reducing dangerous stereotypes and international paranoia. What better place to start than, as *The Big Blue Marble* did, with children? Because of ITT's long-term support, *The Big Blue Marble* is now one of the most widely syndicated programs, seen in sixty-three countries.

THE IMPACT OF A SINGLE MOVIE

Film resembles television in having a powerful effect on children's view of the social world. Fifty years ago, long before television, a program of research known as the Payne Fund Studies focused on the effect of movies on preadolescent and adolescent students. R. C. Peterson and L. L. Thurstone, the authors of one of the Payne Fund volumes, selected thirteen feature films they thought might influence social attitudes: for example, *The Birth of a Nation* was expected to influence racial attitudes; *All Quiet on the Western Front*, attitudes toward war. The researchers tested children's attitudes before and after each film. (The children were white students from small midwestern towns.)¹⁹

About half the films produced a shift in attitudes after one viewing, and in some cases the shifts were very large. For example, before seeing *The Birth of a Nation*, about 80 percent of the students had scores of 8 or over on a scale of attitudes toward blacks (where 11 represented the most positive attitude on the scale). After seeing the film, only about 45 percent had scores in this range. Five months later, the students' racial attitudes were still more negative than they had been before the film, although the effect of the film had decayed over

time. In general, long-term effects were about midway between the original attitudes and the attitudes right after the film. Effects lasted as long as nineteen months, the longest interval tested. Another important finding was that these effects were cumulative; seeing two or three films with a consistent position on a given topic caused more change in attitudes than seeing a single film.

This study indicates that a single exposure to a powerful film can have a definite impact on a young person's view of the world. Film has had a special impact on American culture; especially before the coming of television, people all over the country would see the same films. Even today, many more children view a popular film than see almost any given television show. Thus, any effect of a popular film is a mass effect.

An interesting question is why only half the films produced changes in attitudes. Because the most renowned film, *The Birth of a Nation*, produced the largest effect and because those films which did not change attitudes are unknown today, I would speculate that the power to influence social attitudes depends on the artistic and dramatic quality of the film. This is an issue that bears further investigation.

The finding that the effects on social attitudes were cumulative is quite staggering when applied to television. The young people in this study saw, at most, only a few films relevant to a given attitude. Although children may pay less attention to TV than to a movie, just think how many shows embodying a single consistent view of social reality are seen by the regular viewer of a TV series. And just think how many different series may present basically similar social attitudes. Thus, the cumulative effects of television are likely to be much larger than those of film.

Research in Sweden speaks to this point. "Television,

over the long term, has given practically all school children impulses to desire a more active, mobile and urban lifestyle. There is, among other things, a greater desire to move, particularly to the towns. Expectations with regard to future occupations have become higher, and partly different in character. Children dream, for example, more often of such glamorous occupations as becoming footballers, pilots, pop singers and film-stars, at the expense of such occupations as those of teacher, craftsman, or shop assistant."²⁰ A parallel phenomenon was found in England, even when television was at an early stage of development.²¹

CHARACTER RECOGNITION AND IDENTIFICATION

Grant Noble, in *Children in Front of the Small Screen*, suggests that children, through recognizing television characters as similar to people they know, reduce uncertainty about the outcome of the plot and are able to predict what will happen next. Noble contrasts recognition of a character with identification, in which children, losing themselves in the screen, *become* the character. Identification does not lead to skill in predicting what will happen next because, in Noble's words, "Children who have identified with a film hero, who share the here and now of his ongoing film experiences, do not need to look forward in the plot."²² Although both processes occur in both media, Noble presents evidence that whereas the movies encourage more identification, television tends to encourage more recognition, thereby allowing the child to interact vicariously with a whole social world.

James Hosney has suggested that it may be that children do not lose themselves so much in television because the edges of the TV screen are always at the center

of the viewer's visual field. In the movies, the larger screen puts the edges at the periphery of vision, and the lack of distinct edges makes it easier for the viewer to become part of the scene, thus facilitating identification.

The connection between recognition and prediction is supported by Noble's experimental evidence. When a film was stopped in the middle, children who recognized any character in the film as similar to someone they knew were much more likely to predict correctly what the hero or villain would do next. Identification with a character neither helped nor hurt the ability to predict.

Thus, starting with character recognition, children acquire knowledge of predictable behavior patterns within the screen world. Knowledge of such patterns may then be applied off the screen as well as on: children may use similarities between screen characters and real people to make generalizations about the rules and regularities of human behavior.

KNOWLEDGE, FEELING, AND BEHAVIOR

The power of television to change children's social attitudes and their beliefs about the ways people behave in the real world raises the question of how these changes in attitudes affect children's actual behavior. One kind of effect is easy to trace: children often take well-known TV characters as examples to be imitated. The day after Fonzie took out a library card on *Happy Days*, there was a five-fold increase in the number of children applying for library cards in the United States. Details like this, inserted into entertainment programming, could have a very positive effect on children's behavior without requiring any basic change in the nature of TV shows.²³

The link between television and behavior is a complex

one, influenced by many factors other than the knowledge and attitudes gained from television. However, many research studies have found links between children's viewing of antisocial (such as violent) behavior on television and their own subsequent behavior, and another body of evidence indicates that seeing positive social behavior, such as helping and cooperation, on television can influence children to act in more prosocial ways. As with social *knowledge*, television as a model for *behavior* can work in opposite directions, depending on the content of the program.²⁴

The long-term effects of television on behavior are harder to determine than its long-term effects on knowledge and attitudes. But knowledge and attitudes often do influence action. For example, a child's attitude toward and knowledge about a minority group will obviously affect how the child acts upon meeting a member of that group.

Sometimes feelings are the connecting link among television, knowledge, and behavior. An example is the use of television to reduce children's fear of undergoing surgery. Children between the ages of four and twelve who were about to have various types of surgery were shown video films of a child being hospitalized and undergoing surgery. Compared to a similar group who had seen an unrelated film, these children were less fearful, both before and after their operations, and showed less postoperative problem behavior.²⁵

This use of television in a hospital makes an important point: in thinking about the relationship between children and television, we should not limit ourselves to broadcast television. Advances in video technology have created immense possibilities for special-purpose films for specific audiences. Already there is a body of scientific literature on the therapeutic use of film to diminish anxiety.

Television (or film) is better suited to this kind of emotional education than is print.²⁶ For example, a pamphlet might have been used to prepare the children for surgery, but no matter how clever the presentation, it would have been at a disadvantage. Print is linear and sequential; it can present only one thing at a time. But emotional reactions generally occur simultaneously with other events. Partly because language is sequential and partly because each individual word carries only a portion of a complete thought, it takes relatively great effort to convey a piece of information in print. This is one reason "a picture is worth a thousand words." (While television is better at presenting a character's visible feelings, print is better at presenting inner thoughts; this point will be discussed in Chapter 6.)

For the presurgery film to succeed, it had to show the surgery patient's feelings about what was happening, not just present information about events. The power of television to stimulate memorable emotions is demonstrated by a study of Swiss teenagers, in which emotional reactions to television characters persisted for three weeks, while strictly cognitive effects of the show diminished in this same time period.²⁷

Print also cannot present the events of the surgery as realistically as can television or film. The realism of film makes it much easier for the viewer (in this case the patient) to recognize what is happening to him or her as similar to the film and therefore makes it easier to apply the learning from the film to the real situation.

This power of television and film to communicate feeling can be a danger as well as a benefit. The stimulation of an emotion in a situation, like television, where it has no real-world consequences can result in a desensitizing of feeling. For example, researchers have found that televised violence makes children more tolerant of aggression in other children and less emotionally re-

sponsive to violence themselves. In the words of an eleven-year-old interviewed by *Newsweek*: "You see so much violence that it's meaningless. If I saw someone really get killed, it wouldn't be a big deal. I guess I'm turning into a hard rock."²⁸

The arousal of emotion through showing adult situations that children would not otherwise generally be exposed to can have other effects as well. In England in the late 1950s, adolescents with televisions were more worried about growing up than similar adolescents who did not have television sets.²⁹ It is as though day-after-day exposure to the adult world as portrayed on television makes young people more fearful about creating their own adult world.

LEARNING TO BE A CONSUMER

An important part of children's social reality is their role as consumers. Television has an obvious impact on children as consumers in countries like the United States, where television is an almost purely commercial venture and television advertising is an important part of children's exposure to the medium. However, television also affects the child as consumer even when there is no advertising at all. In the 1950s it was found that British children who had access only to the BBC, which carries no advertising, had more materialistic ambitions than those without television. Adolescent boys who watched television, for example, were more focused on what they would *have* in the future; adolescent boys without television were more focused on what they would be *doing*. The longer the child's experience with television, the more this materialistic outlook increased.³⁰ Apparently, the visual images of television create an emphasis on visible and tangible objects, hence on consumption, in defining one's identity and life style.

Formal features of television also influence the child's development as a consumer. Commercials in the United States are heavily visual, action-oriented, quick-paced, and repetitive, and use catchy music and jingles. All of these are features that catch attention and promote learning even among quite young children, as the research on *Sesame Street* showed. (Indeed, the creators of *Sesame Street* got some of their ideas from studying the techniques used in commercials.)

Parents in the United States tend to fear the teaching potential of commercials. Because advertisers have perfected their teaching techniques, this fear is justified. Children do attend to and learn from commercials. They remember slogans, jingles, and brand names. They often try to influence their parents to buy advertised goods. Children below age seven or so are particularly vulnerable to such effects, probably because they do not discriminate between the program and the commercial and do not realize that the purpose of commercials is to sell goods;³¹ they simply accept commercials as presenting information like any other television format.

What can be done? It turns out that the impact of commercials can be very much affected by discussion and instruction. For example, researchers at UCLA developed curricula for the second and fourth grades to help children understand the purpose and nature of commercials, so that they would make more effective consumer decisions. The curriculum that worked best explained how commercials create needs and desires in children. It also stressed paying attention to the information in the commercial, and it stimulated children to be more reflective and ask questions about commercials. One week after the three half-hour lessons, children in both grades found advertised products less desirable, understood commercials better, and found them less credible.³²

The success of this brief educational program shows that it is not very difficult to counteract television's power to teach when such teaching is not in the children's best interests. This curriculum was developed for school use, but parents can use the same techniques at home: point out that commercials are designed to sell by creating needs; question the methods used (such as exaggeration); and generally make commercials a subject for discussion, evaluation, and questioning.

TELEVISION AS REALITY

One reason children are so vulnerable to the messages of television is that they take what they see on television to be reality. Very young children equate all of television except cartoons with reality. Aimée Dorr tells an anecdote about her three-year-old son, who saw her being interviewed on television: "His father reported that he called out my name, asked me questions, and tried to show me things. He became quite angry when I continued to ignore his attempts to engage me in social interchange and finally left the room in disgust."³³ Much research shows that this confusion of television with reality diminishes steadily with age.

As children get older they adopt new definitions of television reality: first they believe that anything on television that *could* happen in the real world is real on television; later they believe that what they see on television represents something that *probably* happens in the real world. But despite these changes in the meaning of reality, the belief that entertainment programming represents social reality does not seem to change much with greater life experience or exposure to television. The realistic style of much entertainment programming seems to contribute to this effect.³⁴

Furthermore, if children either recognize characters

on television as being like someone they know or identify with them, this greater personal involvement leads them to consider the program more real. Since children tend to identify with the fantastic characters on television (such as Superman) and to recognize the realistic ones, powerful factors operate to get the child to treat the televised world as real.³⁵ This belief in the reality of the televised world makes children of all age groups vulnerable to the social messages of television.

Children recognize books as fiction sooner than television.³⁶ Apparently, the fact that print does not physically resemble the things and events it symbolizes makes it easier to separate its content from the real world. Thus, as many have feared, television, with its presentation of live action, is a more seductive medium in transforming fantasy into reality. But what is a negative effect in the presentation of fiction can be a positive one in the presentation of fact. Television can be an extremely compelling medium for teaching children about the real world. In Scandinavia it was found that if eleven-year-olds learn of the same news event from television, parents, teachers, and the newspaper, the majority will rely primarily on television. They consider television the best-informed medium, and they say that on television "you can see for yourself what is happening."³⁷

Minority children and children of low socioeconomic status are typically the most vulnerable to having their concepts of social reality shaped by television, for, in the United States, they are even more likely than white and middle-class children to believe in the realism of the world presented on the screen.³⁸ This may be merely an example of the principle that the less you know about an area the more power television has to define that area for you. The world of U.S. television is predominantly white and middle-class, and thus it is, on the average, more familiar to white and middle-class chil-

dren than to those from minority groups and those of lower socioeconomic status. According to this principle, a minority or working-class child with extensive personal experience within the middle-class white world would, like middle-class white children, be less vulnerable to the television view of this world.

While television has more power to define the unknown, the unknown is also more likely to be misunderstood. For example, a program about a middle-class family is understood better by young middle-class children than by working-class children, and a program about a working-class family is understood better by young working-class children.³⁹ Thus, portrayals of a social milieu unlike the child's own will be less understood, even while they have greater power to shape the child's view of that milieu.

A child's attitudes and beliefs can function as a defense against television messages that contradict them. Children with stereotyped views of sex roles remember a still picture better if it agrees with their views than if it contradicts them.⁴⁰ Thus attitudes are a defense against nonstereotyped images. Social beliefs can lead not only to selective memory, but also to boomerang effects on attitudes. In an experiment in the United States, non-sexist commercials were shown to children aged eight, ten, and thirteen. After seeing the commercials, the eight- and ten-year-olds, both boys and girls, endorsed less traditional roles for women. But there was a boomerang effect among the thirteen-year-old boys, who gave an even stronger endorsement of traditional roles for women. Just entering a period of working out their own masculine identities, these boys may have found the message of the commercials threatening. (The age differences also reflect the general finding that younger viewers are more open to messages from the media than are older ones.) A similar boomerang effect was found in England

among adolescents who watched a program presenting men and women in nontraditional occupational roles. Such reactions against television's messages occur when those messages clash with a child's pre-existing attitudes. They demonstrate that the effects of television are a function of what the child brings to the medium, not only of what the medium brings to the child.⁴¹

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Almost no research has been done on what parents would probably most like to know: how to counteract the influence of the social information children get from television. We do know that by discussing shows with children, parents or other adults can increase the benefits and decrease the negative effects of watching commercial television programs.⁴² For example, adult interpretation of *Batman* made elementary-school children more critical of the violence in the show, and, as mentioned earlier, adult interpretation of an episode of *All in the Family* led children to be more accepting of nontraditional sex roles.

To be more specific, parents can affect what social knowledge children take away from a show by highlighting important information and by interpreting what is going on in the show. In a study of this type of situation, four- and five-year-olds watched an episode of the family-hour program *Adam-12*. The episode dealt with students being truant from school and getting into trouble. One group of students watched the show with a teacher who made neutral comments such as "Let's sit here and watch a TV show." A second group watched with the same teacher, but the teacher made explanatory comments such as "Oh, no! That boy is in trouble. He did not go to school when he was supposed to. He was

playing hookey and that is bad." Children in the second group learned more specific details of the program, increased their knowledge of truancy, and increased their positive attitudes in the direction of the teacher's comments. The differences between the two groups were still evident one week later, indicating that the discussion promoted retention as well as immediate learning.⁴³

This simple process is one that parents can easily follow at home, if they are willing to watch television with their children. Observation of what actually goes on in homes indicates that parents and children often do watch television together, but that the parents seldom provide this type of commentary.⁴⁴

Although television in the United States may sometimes seem to put forth a uniform message about the nature of the social world, we have seen that diverse messages do exist and that television can have quite opposite influences on social attitudes depending on program content. These facts have an obvious yet important implication for parents: select shows for your children and help the children to be selective themselves. While all parents will not agree on the social values they want to teach their children, all parents do socialize their children into one set of values or another. Selection, as well as discussion of television programs, needs to be looked upon not as a form of censorship but as an extension of this normal and universal process of socialization.

It is useful to remember that television seems to be especially influential in forming attitudes and knowledge on topics with which the child lacks experience. Children who have first-hand knowledge of a topic make a clearer separation between the real world and the television world.⁴⁵ Thus, parents can counteract television by giving their children first-hand experience in areas

they consider important. For example, a way to counteract the ethnic stereotypes on television is to expose your child to people from different ethnic groups.

WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO

Aimée Dorr and her colleagues have developed two courses in critical television skills to encourage young children to question the reality of what they see on television. Each curriculum combines taped program segments, group discussion, role playing, games, and commentary by the teacher. The "industry curriculum" emphasizes the lack of realism in entertainment programming and the industry's economic system; for example, the fact that programs are broadcast to make money. The "process curriculum" is designed to teach children processes and sources for judging television realism; it emphasizes that programs vary in realism.

In a test of these courses, the industry curriculum produced the most skepticism about the reality of a television show. (The show was *The Jeffersons*, a situation comedy that presents a rather stereotypical view of a black family.) The process curriculum led to more balanced judgments in which children decided that the show was both real and pretend. Perhaps most important, these two curricula developed in children a questioning attitude toward the social reality portrayed on television.⁴⁶

This work shows that children as young as age five can be taught, in a relatively short time, to make critical judgments about the reality of what they see on television. Such school programs can help transform child viewers from passive consumers to active critics of the social world presented on entertainment television.