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Beginnings Workshop

Watching Television: What Are Children Learning About Race and Ethnicity?

by Susan Linn and Alvin F. Poussaint

Whether we turn on television to be entertained, educated, or informed, the images we see can profoundly influence our view of the world, including how we perceive our own race and ethnicity, as well as the race and ethnicity of others. For many reasons, young children are especially vulnerable to television's messages. Because children often have difficulty differentiating between reality and fantasy, they are apt to accept what they see on the screen as true. In addition, their experience of, and knowledge about, how the world works is limited. Therefore, their beliefs about it — including their attitudes about race and ethnicity — are still malleable.

The Development of Racial Attitudes

A black doctor was walking down a street in a white suburban neighborhood when a five year old white boy greeted him. "Hello, Mr. Garbage Man," he said, cheerfully.

Why would a five year old assume that a black stranger in his neighborhood was a garbage man? How do children learn stereotypes and negative or positive attitudes about race and ethnicity? Studies indicate that children absorb messages from their parents, caretakers, and from the world around them. The foundation on which we build our attitudes about race and ethnicity is established in early childhood. Children's perceptions of the world are influenced from babyhood by the race and ethnicity of all of the people they encounter as they grow — neighbors, friends, teachers, pediatricians, police officers, athletes, rich people, homeless people, and criminals. Children, unless corrected, will tend to generalize from their own experience of members of a group to all members of that group. For instance, the only African Americans the little boy described above ever saw in his community were sanitation workers.

Children become aware of differences in color and appearance as early as two and a half. They begin, even at that early age, to absorb society's attitudes about these differences, including the erroneous message that "white is better." They also learn that there is a stigma to being poor, particularly to being black and poor.

They may learn denigrating stereotypes from listening to their parents, or others, talking in overtly negative tones about people whose race or ethnicity is different from their own. They may notice that white people, with some exceptions, are dominant in advertisements, book illustrations, stories, and television programs. They observe who is present and who is absent from their schools, churches, or synagogues. Children exposed to television news will note the color of the criminals being arrested in handcuffs and the color of the police officers. All of these images, distorted or not, affect their perceptions of a wide range of people and their place in the world.

Studies show that active intervention from adults in children's lives can change, broaden, and modify the stereotypic racial perceptions children inadvertently absorb. By the age of eight, unless we take steps to negate the development of prejudicial attitudes, children begin to assign greater or lesser social status to themselves, their

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families, and others. By adolesence, some children associate qualities such as poor school performance with certain minority students, while higher achievement and aspirations are attributed to other groups.

Fortunately, children who are privileged to grow up in integrated neighborhoods, or attend integrated schools, are exposed to a wide range of people from ethnicities other than their own. They have the opportunity to experience relationships that cross racial and ethnic boundaries, and belie societal stereotypes. They may know African American teachers, Latino police officers, Asian American athletes, as well as whites who engage in a wide variety of occupations. Unless they are bombarded with prejudicial messages from home or the media, daily experience with diversity gives children the chance to debunk stereotypes that equate Italian Americans with gangsters, Irish Americans with alcoholics, and Jewish Americans with misers. But children who live in segregated communities often rely on media, especially television, for information about people whose race, ethnicity, or class differs from their own.

Learning Racial Attitudes from Television

Let us state up front that we believe children under two should not be exposed to television, and that children under five should see as little as possible — a maximum of one to two hours a day. At the same time, we know that many homes have no restrictions on children's television viewing and that television, with its awesome power to educate and persuade, is a ubiquitous presence in the lives of children.

All television is value laden, whether it is designed to be educational or not, and children learn much more from each program than its stated educational goals. Whatever lessons a television program is designed to teach, it also provides children with messages about race, ethnicity, gender, and class.

For instance, a child watching a program about science which features only white people may infer that people of color are not interested in, involved with, or good at science. Children who watch programs portraying Latinos only as maids or criminals get a false, harmful view about the role of Latinos in society, especially if they have no counterbalancing experiences from real life. Even animated shows featuring talking animal characters can influence racial attitudes. The cadence, tone, and accent of each character's voice may be associated with certain ethnic groups.

When children watch programs that feature racial stereotypes, they absorb that point of view into their sense of the world. When most of the programs they watch only feature people of a particular ethnicity, or if programs portray certain ethnic groups in a consistently negative or consistently positive manner, children acquire misperceptions and misinformation about racial and ethnic groups different from their own. Black school children, for instance, have reported that white children expect them to be comedians because they see so many black sitcoms on television.

Nonetheless, one only has to look at programming and commercials from before 1970 to recognize that television has made great progress toward diversity. African Americans, in particular, are more in evidence on television. However, a closer look reveals that minorities still do not fare well on the tube. Studies show that upper middle class, white male professionals make up most of the main characters on television, with non-white characters providing only token representations — and often these are sinister. One positive trend in recent years is that black characters have been increasingly cast in professional roles as doctors, lawyers, and scientists. Still, the typical black sitcom portrays them as child-like buffoons and clowns.

These racial misrepresentations on television clearly shape children's attitudes. A 1996 survey conducted by a child advocacy group, Children Now, shows that all children, including children of color, tend to attribute positive characteristics, such as intelligence, doing well in school, being well educated, and being a leader, to white characters. At the same time, negative characteristics, such as breaking the law, being lazy, and acting goofy, are associated more often with minority characters.

An absence of diversity on television is almost as damaging to viewers as negative portrayals. Television, as a reflection of cultural values and norms, gives a kind of credibility to the issues, causes, and people featured on its programs. Groups consistently excluded from the medium experience themselves as irrelevant to, or devalued by, the majority culture. According to the Children Now survey, kids overwhelmingly think it is important to be able to see people like themselves on the screen. Yet many minority groups, including Asian Americans and Latinos, rarely see themselves reflected in significant numbers on television. Children from these groups talked about their feelings of being left out, or ignored by society, because they are not well represented on television.

Whatever a child's race and ethnicity, television's misrepresentative view of the world is damaging. It is not good for white children to be taught an inflated sense of superiority based on race. Nor is it good for minority

children to have their self-esteem damaged by being inadvertently taught that their race is inferior, or overlooked, by the rest of society. The United States is becoming increasingly diverse. As we head into the 21st century, the US is becoming a country in which people of color are in the majority. It's essential for children to be provided with tools for flourishing in multicultural schools, work places, and neighborhoods.

If television producers would eliminate shows and characters that foster prejudice and stereotypes, and promote multicultural programming, they could tap into the medium's vast unused potential for positively educating children about race, ethnicity, and all kinds of human similarities and differences. Indeed, studies show tangible benefits to exposing children, even preschool children, to programs that feature positive interracial and inter-ethnic relationships. Children watching such programs increase their capacity to cooperate, and develop more positive attitudes about racial and ethnic groups. Many show an actual reduction in prejudice.

➤ Recommendations

Until the faces on television change, adults can at least mitigate the effects of programs that feature negative portrayals of non-white groups or an absence of minority characters. Select the programs your children watch not just for their overt educational content but for their underlying social messages as well. Look for programs such as PBS's "Reading Rainbow," "Sesame Street," and "Puzzle Place" and Nickelodeon's "Gullah Gullah Island" that provide windows to a multicultural world. As you select programming for the children in your charge, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does this program feature characters from ethnicities other than European American?
- Does this program model positive relationships between people of different races and ethnicities?
- How are minority groups portrayed on this program? Are they either all bad or all good? Smart or stupid?
- Are minority groups represented only as minor characters? Are they leaders or followers? Are they subservient or powerful?
- What are the range of their occupations? Is one group consistently portrayed as wealthy? Is one group always portrayed as poor?
- Does this program employ put-down humor? Comedies that rely on negative humor often get their laughs at the expense of characters' physical characteristics.
- Does this program feature racial satire? Satire can be a great way to raise an adult's awareness of social injustice. However, it is beyond the comprehension of young children because they are extremely literal in their interpretation of situations. A program that uses racial epithets to prove a point may actually be teaching those words to young children who can't appreciate the larger, ironic context.

Remember that you do not have to rely on television as children's only window into the rich diversity of the world. Make sure that the books in your center, or the library books that you borrow, provide a true, multicultural reflection of the world. Children often enjoy impromptu play acting of stories or folk tales from around the world. Companies now package multicultural crayons, consisting of a range of flesh tones, so that children can accurately represent the people in their world when they draw. Music, songs, dance, and food are wonderful ways to engage children in multiculturalism. It's important to stress the emotional and spiritual enhancement that each of us gains by participating in other cultures.

Finally, it's essential to begin talking with children about the world at an early age. If you see Blacks, Latinos, and Asians consistently omitted from television programs, let children know that it unfairly misrepresents our diverse society. If you notice a racial and/or ethnic stereotype or slur on television, or anywhere else, then talk to your children about it. Comments such as "You know, all Italian Americans aren't like the gangsters in this show" are a good way to raise children's awareness.

Conversations that mediate the messages children receive from television help them begin an important lifelong dialog about prejudice, racial and ethnic discrimination, diversity, and inclusion. Such ongoing dialogs will help our youngest citizens appreciate the privileges and responsibilities of living in and preserving our great democratic society.

➤ Suggested Readings

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Huston, A. C., et al. (1992). *Big world small screen: The role of television in American society*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.