



Putting the Remote Control Back into the Hands of Parents

How Children Can Benefit from the Digital TV Transition

Exposure to educational television has been shown to have positive effects on the social, intellectual, and educational development of children.¹ Is it possible to find truly educational content on broadcast television?

The State of Television Today

While family may be the most important influence in a child's life, television is not far behind. The DTV transition is coming at a time when children of all ages are heavy media consumers. Television is like having a third parent in the home — competing vigorously for our children's hearts and minds. Television can inform, entertain, and teach. However, some of what TV teaches may not be the things we want our child to learn.

Today, parents are struggling to ensure that their children have the education and skills they need to compete and win in the 21st century economy. But for many parents television is a cause for concern.

- Children watch an average of 25 hours a week of television.²
- Children spend more time watching television than any other activity except sleeping.³

- Children spend four times as much time each week watching television as doing homework.⁴
- By the time a child graduates from high school, she will have watched 8,000 simulated murders and seen hundreds of thousands of commercials.⁵
- Studies show that TV viewing may lead to more aggressive behavior and less physical activity.⁶
- Aggressive product advertising has created children's shows that the FCC considers program-length commercials.⁷

In order to give parents greater control over the television programs viewed by their children, Congress in 1996 created the V-chip system, which includes the design of a rating system in tandem with technology built into TV sets that would enable parents to screen out programs containing sexual, violent, or other indecent material.⁸

Today, to win expedited license renewal approval, a television licensee must provide a minimum of three hours per week of educational and informational programs that “further the positive development” of children 16 years of age and younger.⁹

The Transition to Digital

In September 2004, the FCC unanimously issued new rules to extend children’s television rules to digital television.¹⁰ The rules help ensure that children have access to at least three hours per week of educational television programming in digital format and that parents are able to identify educational shows. This rulemaking constitutes a critical albeit small victory for children that will help increase the impact and decrease the dangers of digital technology.

• Ensuring Three Hours Per Week of Positive Children’s Programming Per Channel

The FCC order requires broadcasters that use their multicasting capacity to provide the equivalent of three hours of children’s programming on each full-time non-subscription channel, resulting in up to 18 hours of children’s programming per week per broadcaster.

• Giving Parents Better Tools to Make Choices for Their Children

The FCC order requires both analog and digital broadcasters to identify core children’s programming by displaying the symbol E/I (for educational/informational) throughout the program — helping provide parents with better information. Advocates have encouraged the FCC

and broadcasters to do even more, for example by ensuring that, with the click of a mouse, parents can learn more about a program and why a program is rated in a certain way.

• Continuing Protections for Children from Aggressive Advertising

Given children’s unique vulnerability to commercial persuasion and the unprecedented levels of commercialism on television, the FCC took an important first step in addressing invasive marketing practices, but stopped short of banning interactive advertising.

Proposed Solutions

For the FCC’s new rules to be meaningful, they have to be enforced — and parents play a key role in this enforcement. Commercial TV stations must make and retain Children’s Television Programming Reports identifying the educational and informational pro-

gramming for children aired by the station. You can also view each station’s reports on the FCC’s web site at <http://www.fcc.gov/mb/policy/kidstv.html>. If parents do not agree that the programming offered by a station is educational or informational, they can file a complaint with the FCC by contacting its Enforcement Bureau.¹²

Media reform activists are stepping forward to challenge the licenses of broadcasters who fail to serve the educational needs of children. After reviewing the children’s television reports filed by Washington, DC, television stations with the assistance of children’s television expert Dr. Dale Kunkel, a Professor in the Department of Communication of the University of Arizona, the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ and the

Three Steps to Improve Children’s TV:

- Find out how your broadcasters are serving your children.
- Make sure your broadcasters know you care — and let the FCC know if they don’t.
- See how tools like the V-Chip, program listings, and web sites can help informed viewing.

Center for Digital Democracy asked the FCC to deny the license renewal applications of two television broadcasters serving the area for failure to serve the educational needs of children.¹³

The groups faulted the stations’ programming for failing to meet four of the FCC’s six requirements for children’s educational programming: 1) the programs were not specifically designed for children, 2) they were not specifically designed to educate, 3) they were not regularly scheduled, and 4) they were not identified on air as educational

All television is educational television. The question is: what is it teaching? ~Nicholas Johnson, FCC Commissioner, 1966–1973¹¹

programming. Some programming not only lacked any significant educational purposes, but contained an anti-social message. As Dr. Kunkel explains, “a program that includes one violent attack after another cannot seriously be said to teach children to ‘get along with others’ as WDCA claims.” One of the questions raised by the two groups: How is teaching children anti-social behavior in their best interest?

Parents in viewing areas in other parts of the country may have similar questions — and the FCC expects you to take action to bring questionable programming to its attention.

This section used as a primary resource the Children Now Spring 2004 newsletter “Digital Television: Sharpening the Focus on Children,” available online at www.childrennow.org and offering a more detailed analysis of the issue.