The Rise and Fall of Children Programming

Remember the good old days of waking up early, making yourself a bowl of cereal, and plopping down in front of the television to watch cartoons? Most adults these days recall these memories with great detail, and reminiscing back to these times recalls a better time for kids’ programs. While the renegade children’s channels such as Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network and Disney Channel still deliver shows to this day, they’re not nearly as golden as they used to be. Just like life, cartoons have to remain up to date, and touch on subjects that are appropriate for that decade of youth. Shows today have lost their mojo due to less morals, being non-relatable, featuring more adult content, and having a shorter running time.

Shows like “Hey Arnold!” that aired on Nickelodeon was famous for teaching children morals about life and problem solving. The majority of shows had this content at the time, and this is what set the stage for children’s’ empathy, compassion, and manners for the future. A child’s brain is like a house that has just been built. The walls are up, and the doors are hung. Then, you go to the store and buy electrical wiring, switches, a fuse box and other electrical supplies. You bring these supplies to the new house and set them on the floor. Will they work? Probably not. You first must string the wiring and hook up all of the connections. This is quite similar to the way our brains are formed (Jensen 583). Children’s cartoons were a huge part of their brain’s development. While the cartoons were comedic, they taught children valuable lessons. As time progressed, there are less of these shows. Shows like Cartoon Network’s “Teen
Titans Go!” display nothing but random acts of silliness, and often lack morals or even a plot for that matter. Cartoons these days are built upon multi-million businesses that care very little about the content, and more about ratings and views. This is the reason why many shows teach less and children gain nothing but a laugh from watching them.

Now it is no secret that cartoons about flying characters with capes and superpowers are unrealistic. The bright capturing colors and extraterrestrial behavior is all made up, and children are aware of this. So, why is that a little boy that just got done watching shows like “Justice League” or “The PowerPuff Girls” is able to relate the story to his own life? Well, despite the fictional aspects of these shows, there was still room for some realism with the plots. Realism in children’s cartoons is important, as it helps children connect what is happening in the show to their real lives. This makes the show more interesting to watch and comprehend. Nowadays, cartoons have become less and less realistic. Though the characters and the way they look don’t matter, it’s often what they’re doing that’s deemed unrealistic. For example, “Uncle Grandpa,” a show aired on Cartoon Network, centers around a middle-aged man dressed in Irish clothing with the mentality of a child. He lives in a RV with a Bengal tiger, an anthropomorphic slice of pizza, and a dinosaur. In one episode, Uncle Grandpa flies in with a pair of wings from an outer space adventure with his friends, after exploring only one planet. The situations often are so fictional that the entire episode is impossible to relate to. Though some think children’s cartoons don’t have to be relatable for them to enjoy it, it’s what they prefer.

Have you ever watched an episode of an old show you used to love, and noticed some inappropriate behavior that the characters displayed that you never caught onto as child? Don’t be too concerned, as it’s common for adult humor to hide out in children’s cartoons. This was a gag that TV producers would put in their shows. It was a perfect plan that the adult jokes would
be noticeable enough for older audiences, but subtle enough to where children didn’t notice it. Currently, adult jokes are displayed in plain sight, and it doesn’t help that children understand the jokes, since society has become more open to inappropriate behavior around children. Things like nudity, sex jokes, and even swearing have crept into every kid’s channels, exposing children at an even earlier age to these factors. An example would be an infamous episode of Disney Channel’s “Fish Hooks,” where the main character Milo is abducted by water aliens. When in class, Milo’s teacher stood before the class in front of chalkboard that had an equation that read “Birds + Bees = Baby,” suggesting they’re in a sex education class. An innuendo is added, as the teacher ask everyone to turn to page “69” in their books. Though the producers thought the joke could pass, children definitely understood the joke, quickly going to their parents with questions. Parents were outraged about the episode, and it was later removed from programming. Children’s innocence is precious, and though learning about sex is something that will soon happen, most parents prefer to teach their children about sex themselves. The content of kids programming absolutely matters. Many, many parents have rules about the quantity of programming their children watch, but far fewer have restrictions on what they watch (Jensen 583).

“Mister Roger’s Neighborhood,” a popular children’s show that aired on PBS in 1968, ran for a total of thirty-six years and aired over nine hundred episodes. For decades, children watched the show, never forgetting the famous theme song “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” Even adults today find themselves humming the catchy tune. The show ended in 2001, after Mr. Roger developed cancer. Before leaving, he left a message on the very last episode, saying how proud he was of all the children he grew up with, and that he’d always be their neighbor. This was emotional for many viewers. Children’s shows back then ran for long periods of time,
making them more recognizable and memorable. Today, children’s shows are lucky if they even run after two years. Often times, the shows today don’t generate enough money, or the producers run out of ideas for the show. “Bella and The Bulldogs,” a show from Nickelodeon, only aired for a year, and children were baffled as to where it had gone. This shows children’s programming has no interest in having long running shows, which, again, takes the heart out of television. Additionally, unlike “Mister Roger’s Neighborhood,” there are rarely goodbye episodes, and shows are often ended abruptly.

This isn’t all to say that today’s programming is all negative. Every once in a while, a new show that comes along is just as good as the old shows. But, over the years, money, trends, comedy and popularity have taken the soul out of children’s networks. These shows lack morals that teach children about everyday life, have so much fictional content that there is no realism, feature inappropriate content that should be geared towards adults, and run for short periods of time. It’s important not to corrupt a child’s youth, as it doesn’t last forever. The average youth in the United States currently spends one-third of each day exposed to media, and the majority of that exposure occurs outside of parental oversight. Anything playing that much of a role in youngsters’ lives deserves close attention (Larson 583).
Works Cited
