



Preschoolers explore with Dora.

# What Does Mom Like?

Successful children's shows need parental endorsement. And they have to be fun to watch

**W**hen TV goes after toddlers, it's essential that program producers pull mom and dad in first. Preschoolers need their parents to encourage viewing habits.

"We need the moms' support for these shows," says Nancy Kanter, Playhouse Disney senior VP of programming. "They don't have to love it—it's hard to find a mom who really enjoys sitting down and watching *Barnyard*, even though kids sure love it—but they have to support a show if it's going to be successful. It is something we have to work very hard at because, if it smells like broccoli and tastes like broccoli, kids aren't going to want to eat it."

And the fact is, cooking up this kind of nourishment takes a complicated recipe, with lots of chefs in the kitchen.

"The quickest way to get [a series on-air] is not to spend years and years researching and getting educational consultants and constantly testing the shows," says Linda Simensky, senior director of children's programming at PBS. But because that's the drill for educational shows, it often takes an extra year to get the program in shape.

All that extra time and expense for a dwindling return on advertising is one reason the broadcast networks have ceded their Saturday-morning kids blocks to cable partners and another reason kids cable networks program pepper their after-school blocks with older-kids fare that seems heavy on fun but light on learning.

## A SAFE HAVEN

"Nick's attitude is that kids get education at school. What Nick wants to be for kids is a safe haven where they can find their favorite characters and play great games," says Brown Johnson, executive creative director for Nick Preschool Television. "They have enough pressure from going to school, and then they have homework. Nick, and I think rightly so, doesn't think it needs to be more school for kids."

There is, in discussing educational television, the supposition that educational is, by definition, not interesting to a child. And maybe that's true.

"In theory, you wonder why an 8-year-old wouldn't be receptive to an educational show; but in fact, you just don't see it," says Disney's Kanter. "Look at the shows that are popular and resonate with kids. From a pop-culture perspective, they are the shows that are more purely entertainment."

Still, kids networks know that children start watching TV early, and if they get hooked on Nickelodeon, Disney, Cartoon or Discovery while they're young, they are likely to stay there when they're older.

"Television is a shockingly powerful medium for children," says Brigid Sullivan, VP for children's

educational and interactive programming at WGBH Boston, which produces PBS' *Arthur* and *Postcards From Buster* and Discovery Kids' *Peep and the Big Wide World*. "There's almost nothing a 3-year-old would rather do than watch television. It's frightening."

And if you make it, and make it well, the kids (and moms) will be there. Not all networks that serve kids believe school-age children don't like educational shows. PBS last October launched PBS Kids Go, an after-school block of educational shows—among them *Arthur*, *Postcards From Buster* and WNET's *Cyberchase*—that are aimed squarely at 6- to 8-year-olds. Putting the shows into one targeted block has meant greater success for all, with *Cyberchase* improving its performance by 28% in the past year.

## IF IT ISN'T FUN, KIDS WON'T WATCH

Marjorie Kaplan, executive VP/general manager of Discovery Kids, says that providing educational programming for all kids (and adults) remains a solid part of the Discovery mission, too.

"It is core to Discovery's belief that it is possible to do entertaining television for kids that also has rich content at its base," she says. "Still, entertainment has to be first, because otherwise they won't watch."

The fact that Nickelodeon has been the top-rated kids' network for years proves that it knows what kids like, with such popular programs as *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Jimmy Neutron* and *The Fairly OddParents*. Disney also has big hits with shows for preteens such as *That's So Raven* and *Kim Possible*.

While those shows encourage kids to be good people and teach life lessons, they keep hard curricula, such as reading and math, to a minimum.

"From a skills perspective, we've yet to find the com-

mercial model that supports cognitive educational programming for school-age kids, but we're doing pretty well with social programming," says Alice Calin, VP of programming and development for Cartoon Network's new preschool block, Tickle U. "Where's the TV-screen-based analog for the chess club, the debate team, the yearbook staff? On the content side, they end up online. I think that's where we're seeing more of a balance. As kids get older, they are spending at least as much time online as they are watching television."

## PLENTY OF SHOWS TO CHOOSE FROM

It's a different story for younger viewers. Preschoolers can choose from plenty of shows, from Nickelodeon's top-rated *Dora the Explorer*, *Blue's Clues* and *Go Diego Go* to PBS' old stand-by *Sesame Street*. Playhouse Disney offers shows with new and old Disney favorites, including *Jo Jo's Circus*, *Stanley*, *Rolie Polie Olie*, *Bear in the Big Blue House*, *The Book of Pooh* and *The New Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, as well as live-action series *The Wiggles*.

Discovery Kids takes a similar approach, also focusing on what it knows best: science and nature. The channel has implemented the Ready, Set, Learn! block for preschoolers. Animated character Pat the Penguin—an enthusiastic and curious learner—guides kids while serving as a peer and role model.

One of Discovery's biggest successes is the Emmy-winning *Peep and the Big Wide World*, which is funded by the National Science Foundation.

In the show, *Peep*, a chick who was literally born yesterday, discovers his world with the help of his friends, Chirp, a baby robin, and Quack, a baby duck.

"From a kid's perspective, it's just delightful, playful, silly and funny," says Discovery's Kaplan. "For an adult, it's also really satisfying to watch." —P.A.



Discovery's "silly" *Peep and the Big Wide World* teaches science lessons well.