

Kids TV, Now With More Vitamins

Programmers respond to critics, regulators with a flurry of healthy initiatives

By Kevin Downey

With new regulations on program content and attacks by advocacy groups on both networks and advertisers, kids TV is under siege. And it is responding by attempting to put its best, most responsible foot forward.

Watch kids TV now and you'll see messages about everything from eating right to encouraging kids to help their peers affected by hurricanes that devastated the Gulf Coast. Stung by critics—and legislators—who say kids TV turns children into mini couch potatoes, kids networks now urge their audience to shut off the TV to go outside and play.

Kids programming has been under a microscope for years, but this scrutiny is now growing far more intense. The FCC's Children's Television Act stipulates a minimum required amount of educational programming by broadcasters, but the commission has new rules set to start Jan. 1 that, for the first time, would apply to cable as well as broadcast. Disney, Time Warner and Viacom are fighting to crush the rules altogether (see page 28).

KEEPING TABS ON FOOD MARKETING

At the same time, a pile of research has brought national attention to childhood obesity, including some that link the problem to kids TV and advertising. Just last week, the Centers for Disease Control reported that 2 million teenagers have pre-diabetic conditions due to obesity.

Earlier, after the Surgeon General warned that childhood obesity is the nation's top health problem, ad agencies and advertisers agreed to keep better tabs on food-marketing practices.

Each network is wary of additional government oversight, and most are careful to note that recent attempts to promote healthy living, volunteerism and learning are part of a continuing effort to reach kids with positive messages, not just a special effort motivated by fear of tougher rules.

Viacom's Nickelodeon, which has

preschooler block Nick Jr. that also runs on sister network CBS and the preschool network Noggin, perhaps shot the loudest gun in promoting healthy living with its new partnership with former President Clinton and the American Heart Association. The trio is promoting healthy eating and exercise through outreach programs and activities. (That sounds nice, but the involvement of the Clinton Foundation drew fire last week from The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, a coalition of health-care professionals. It criticized the former president for linking up with Viacom, which is otherwise in court challenging the tougher children's rules.)

LET'S GET PHYSICAL

Nickelodeon does a lot for kids. "We like to say this is part of our DNA, empowering kids with information to be active, productive, well-rounded citizens," says Marva Smalls, executive VP of public affairs at Nickelodeon. "We don't believe kids are just the future. They are the present, and they deserve all the bells and whistles for a good quality of life now."

But some activists have a different read on the TV industry's altruism. Christy Glauke, associate director of the Children & the Media program at Children Now, a nonpartisan child-advocacy group, says, "We do think that, when the industry's back is against the wall, it does a good job of stepping forward, which they are doing with nutrition issues."

"We are happy to applaud them when they do good things," she adds, "but their actions don't feel complete when, at the same time, they are battling the [FCC] rules that are meant to protect and provide quality programming for kids."

Nickelodeon has scored big with positive press coverage for its "Let's Just Play." The cornerstone of the multidimensional effort is "Worldwide Day of Play," which last occurred Oct. 1, when the network ceases all programming in favor of encouraging kids to get active, away from the TV set. Nickelodeon says 10% of its programming is focused on health, including *LazyTown* on Nick Jr., which focuses on physical fitness and sponsored tours where kids participate in activities.

Time Warner's Cartoon Network has also been promoting positive messages to children with its "Get Animated" initiative, the bulk of it health-based. "The idea



Nick Jr.'s *LazyTown* gets excited about exercise.

of Get Animated is to take charge and get out and do something, including helping yourself by eating better and being more active," says Jim Samples, executive VP/general manager of Cartoon Network. The Get Animated campaign has included a 30-city tour encouraging young viewers to exercise.

"The activities included a ring toss, a mini rock-climbing wall, a little hockey area and a relay-race area," says Mindy Stockfield, senior director of marketing at Cartoon Network. A second tour will take place next summer. "The idea is to present ideas that [kids] can do at home."

And the network's Tickle U preschooler block, launched in August, contains educational elements based on humor. Its outreach includes material for teachers and parents.

Time Warner's Kids WB! is airing several PSAs, including "Kick Start." This initiative got under way this year, with such messages as the benefits of teamwork.



Stung by critics—and legislators—who say kids TV turns children into mini couch potatoes, kids networks now urge their audience to shut off the TV to go outside and play.

Disney channels have a slew of educational and health messages. Disney Channel joined this year with the YMCA to sponsor its "Healthy Kids Day," during which children around the U.S. participated in physical-fitness challenges. The

event coincided with PSAs that featured Disney character Kim from *Kim Possible*.

"WE WANT TO DO THE RIGHT THING FOR KIDS"

Children's-programming provider 4Kids Entertainment, which adapts shows like *Pokémon* for the U.S. and leases Fox's Saturday kids block, is promoting healthier eating to kids and families. This year, its *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Pokémon* partnered with fast-food restaurant Subway for "Eat Fresh. Have Fun. Get Fit."

Discovery Channel, which programs NBC Saturday morning, has its commercial-free "Ready Set Learn." The preschooler block also airs on Discovery Kids Channel and TLC. Discovery shows such as *Hi-5* for preschoolers and *Endurance* for older kids are centered on healthy-lifestyle issues. Like the other networks, Discovery says its interest in healthy kids fare is nothing new, it's just the way it does business.

"One reason we have been doing this for so long is because it is what Discovery is," says Marjorie Kaplan, executive VP/general manager of Discovery Kids. "We also do it because we talk to kids and we know that this matters to them. We try to reflect back the issues that are important to them, and we want to do the right thing for kids." ■



The Disney Channel's *Kim Possible*