

# Can television be good for kids?

*Professor Matt Sanders*

### TELEVISION PROGRAMS THAT ACTUALLY HELP PARENTS AND CHILDREN LEAD HAPPY, HEALTHIER LIVES? WE'D ALL LIKE TO SEE THAT!

Psychologists are often quoted in the media commenting on the impact of television on children and the family. Recent events in the US have once again spotlighted concern that exposure to violent videos, movies and television programs is corrupting our youth and threatening a breakdown of traditional family values.

While debate still rages on just how such a process could occur, suspicion about the media in general is often exhibited by health researchers and professionals. Not only is the media seen as a negative influence on the family, but often attempts by professionals to work with the media in promoting social health issues backfire through sensationalism and misrepresentation, leaving many to simply abandon the media as too hazardous.

Unfortunately this approach can no longer be afforded when one considers the considerable

capacity for television to reach groups of people difficult to access through other means as well as its power to stir politicians and policy advisors into action on previously low profile issues.

The little glowing box in the corner of practically every Australian household has a pervasive influence on our lives. Research shows watching television is the nation's most popular pastime and that the public judge television as the most reliable and credible source of news and new information.

Television is ideally suited to conveying complex material in an entertaining format, depicting behavioural solutions, as well as passing on information effectively to people with poor literacy skills or lower educational levels.

This influence has certainly not gone unnoticed in the past by health authorities. Thirty-second health promotion commercials covering everything from AIDS to exercise have been a feature of Australian television for many years. Yet the success of these campaigns has been mixed.

Saying on television not to do something or how to do something else to millions of households doesn't necessarily translate into getting people to change their behaviour and attitudes.

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In my area of psychological research and practice in particular, family intervention, a 30-second community announcement or expensive paid advertisement is not able to depict effective ways of dealing with family problems.

Parents battling with continual tantrums or wilful misbehaviour aren't going to be able to get much useful information to help them deal with such problems without viewing material that is based on good scientific



research and practice. Parenting solutions need to be presented in a realistic, easy-to-understand format that provides enough detail so that parents know how to handle a situation.

Effective media strategies designed to help people be better parents therefore takes time and money and needs to be based on firm social psychology principles that ensure messages are more likely to be acted upon, while positively influencing public attitudes towards children and parenting.

### **Sounds good in theory, but where's the practice?**

#### **IT'S HERE RIGHT NOW.**

Psychologists at the University of Queensland have just been evaluating the effectiveness of a unique media intervention first screened in New Zealand in 1995. *Families* was a 13-episode "infotainment" program in the vein of such popular Australian programs as *Our House* or *Money*. What made it different was a carefully structured 5 to 7 minute segment each week based on the Positive Parenting Program (Triple P) now currently used by health authorities in five Australian states.

A controlled study of families who recently watched videos of the program reported significantly lower levels of problem behaviour at home, while parents told of feeling more confident and satisfied about parenting after viewing the series. In fact, so strong was the effect, that the reduction in problem behaviour was similar to that observed after an intensive 8-week group program of Triple P conducted by professionals outside of the home.

So why was this television show so positive?

The answer lies with the theory behind parenting support.

Despite many parents in the study perceiving themselves initially as unable to deal with their child's behaviour problems, with relatively minimal support in the form of practical research-based advice they actually solved the problems themselves, thus boosting their self-confidence.

Since there is no right or wrong way to bring up children, and parents will

always have a view about how they want their children to grow up, providing basic targeted information about the way humans behave and interact helps parents adapt these principles to their own home situation. Television can quickly and dynamically portray these behavioural interactions.

This finding points strongly toward the potential value of such programs as integral parts of our nation's primary health care system. Rather than spending billions trying to contain the effects of stressed and fractured families, poor parental support, and rapid social change, why not spend money on equipping ordinary Australians through the mass media with the knowledge and tools to cope with modern parenting?

Perhaps it is now time for health professionals and the media to work collaboratively, mixing the best of both their worlds to produce valuable television programs that not only entertain and make money for the networks, but also help people, and save governments money.

**Find more parenting tips at: [manitoba.ca/triplep](http://manitoba.ca/triplep) or call 945-4777 in Winnipeg or toll-free 1-877-945-4777.**

Professor Matt Sanders is founder of the Triple P - Positive Parenting Program.