

The New Tot TV

Forget about
the three R's.

The latest shows

try to give kids skills that are
building blocks for life

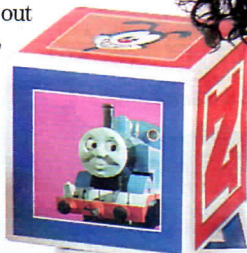
BY LEE A. LUSARDI

If you think that "educational TV" for toddlers means programs that teach ABC's and 1-2-3's, think again. There's a flood of new shows aimed at the 2- to 5-year-old market, and almost none of them are about reading, writing, and arithmetic. These days, TV wants to teach your children how to get along in the world: to have self-esteem, to be tolerant of other cultures, and to learn to solve problems by their own tiny selves.

Of course, "toddler TV" has long had the goal of teaching more than just rudimentary skills. People (or puppets) of color are well-represented, and producers and writers keep a watchful eye out for creeping racism, sexism, and other "isms." Last year, for example, *Sesame Street* introduced Tarah, a little girl who uses a wheelchair. Even public television's *Storytime*, whose purpose is to encourage children to read, makes sure that at least half the readers on the program represent diverse cultures.

Until now, however, these messages of tolerance have been implicit rather than spelled out. But times have changed. On *The Fox Cubhouse*, the new weekday-morning lineup for preschoolers, the agenda consists of "Socialization, Music and Movement, and Nature and the Environment." One *Cubhouse* show, *Rimba's Island*, is populated by a group of animals, led by a multicolored gorilla, who learn respect for other cultures; on *Jim Henson's Animal Show with Stinky and Jake*, a

polar bear and a skunk host a talk show with clips of various species interacting in the wild. "We want to teach kids from an animal's point of view," explains Brian





American Pie: Kiki, Leon, and Julie will tackle ethnic conflicts on PBS's "The Puzzle Place" in January.

Henson, president and CEO of Jim Henson Productions.

On *The Puzzle Place*, coming from public television in January, six puppets with diverse backgrounds will take on issues ranging from ethnic conflict to gender stereotypes to single-parent families. "In America, we've been too concerned

with teaching our children letters and numbers and making sure they can write their own names. This is the first real attempt to give them 'human being' lessons," says Cecily Truett, *The Puzzle Place's* executive producer.

Nickelodeon's new *Nick Jr.* lineup also goes beyond the basics, teaching kids its philosophy of "Flexible Thinking." *Gullah Gullah Island* is a sing-along show featuring an African-American family, and *Allegra's Window*, about the daily concerns of a 3-year-old, will focus on figuring out how to handle new experiences, like the first day of day care.

A more well-intentioned group of shows would be hard to find. But this is, after all, a preschool audience we're talking about. Little kids like to learn their ABC's. They do, in fact, need adult help with problem-solving. Is an audience that can't yet tie its shoes ready for this?

At such tender ages, there's a question of what kids are able to absorb. "At 2 and 3,

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We can all get along: On Fox's "Rimba's Island," multicolored animals teach multicultural respect.

children are struggling with issues of separation and autonomy. It's not until they're 4 or 5 that they get into altruistic thinking," says pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton, host of Lifetime's *What Every Baby Knows*.

Creators of these shows concede that some of their message may fly over the heads of their youngest viewers, but they say that shows are written on several levels. "Pictures and music will tell much of the story for the younger children; older kids will understand more of the language," says *Nick Jr.* exec Brown Johnson.

As for those vanishing ABC's, the thinking seems to be that *Sesame Street* has cornered that market. Producers also note that approximately 60 percent of mothers of children under age 6 now work outside the home. This means that many kids are in day care very early on and must deal with many different kinds of people. They might need some guidance in getting along. "There will be those who will be concerned that we are introducing issues to young children of which they may not be aware," says *The Puzzle Place's* Truett. "But children will grow up in a world where bias is a negative experience for them. They will be on the receiving end of a hurtful remark, or on the giving end of a situation that's not kind. We provide coping mechanisms."

By focusing on the social skills of the preschool set, the new shows are addressing one of the findings of an influential

1991 report by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching: Up to a third of kindergartners in the U.S. lack the language skills, social confidence, and emotional maturity to cope in a classroom. One of the report's recommendations was more educational television. "Next to parents," said the report, "television is, perhaps, a child's most influential teacher."

Oh, yes: parents. For television's positive messages to really sink in, say experts, they must be reinforced by the adults in kids' lives. That means parents must actually watch at least some of the shows and then talk about them with their kids—advice that will come as a blow to those who have used toddlers' TV time as a chance to get dinner started, or just get a break.

Not only is the burden on parents to be involved—they must also be selective. The American Academy of Pediatrics advises no more than one to two hours of daily viewing for all children. Brazelton adds that even a half hour of TV at one time can be exhausting for young children. "They become so intensely absorbed by it that their heart rates speed up, slow down, speed up," he says. "They haven't the capacity to shut down and take it easy on themselves that you have when you get older."

What can toddlers learn from television? The best evidence so far indicates that they can absorb cognitive skills—letters, numbers, shapes, and colors—and bad stuff, too: Watching a lot of violence may translate into aggressive behavior on the playground. Kindness, cooperation, and tolerance are harder to measure. It might be best to think of the new wave of children's shows as chicken soup: Can't hurt, might help. So pick a show, turn on the television, and ask your toddler to make room for you on the couch—nicely, of course. ■

Lee A. Lusardi is special features editor of "McCall's" magazine and the mother of 2 1/2-year-old twins.