

Conference report

TV is here to stay

How can television contribute to children's language development?

National Literacy Trust Annual Conference

Monday 15 March 2004



Contents	Page number
Presentation summaries	3
Research review	4
Academic panel	5
Programme makers	8
Discussion groups	12
Appendix – speaker biographies	16

Presentation summaries

Liz Attenborough, manager of the National Literacy Trust's Talk To Your Baby campaign, welcomed delegates to the conference. She opened the conference by explaining that the National Literacy Trust believes strongly in the benefits that a language-rich environment can have for young children – both educationally and socially. The Trust's Talk To Your Baby campaign is working with practitioners to get this message to current and future parents, highlighting both the importance and the pleasures of talking and listening to young children. Such is the importance of the issue, Liz said, that it should be placed alongside other essential elements such as food, warmth and attention to medical needs.

In Talk To Your Baby's first year, the campaign has been met by professionals with instant understanding of the issues involved. Among the media, two responses have been common: "Can there really be a need for this?" and "Surely television must be to blame".

The Trust believes that there are many social and cultural factors, beyond the popularity of television in the home, which may impact on children's language development – for example, changing family circumstances and lifestyles, the pace of living, buggies facing away from the pusher. However, it may be that parents simply don't realise the importance of talking to their child.

Given its prevalence in modern life, television was chosen as an initial focus. We need to understand both the positive and negative implications of television for children's language skills.

The keynote speaker was **Deidre Sanders**, agony aunt for *The Sun* and a trustee of the National Family and Parenting Institute. Deidre opened by saying how pleased she was to be part of a discussion where television is not the "villain". She approached the issue from the parents' perspective, acknowledging how hard it is not to use television in the home. It has become the modern "mothers' little helper" and even parents who are aware of all the sensible ways to approach the use of television can come to rely on it as a way of giving themselves a break.

Deidre said that in an ideal world, parents would be sitting alongside their children all the time that they were watching but this is not always practical; the use of television as a "babysitter" is inevitable. She also pointed out, from her own experience, that there is a limit to the number of times an adult can re-watch children's films and remain sane.

In her role as 'agony aunt' on *The Sun*, Deidre receives emails and letters from parents in need of help with personal problems. Their children's experience of television may be "damaging", she said, for example, watching adult programmes without interaction or intervention from their parents. But the impact on their children's language skills is probably the parents' last concern, after all the other issues they have to deal with. Watching television is sometimes what gets these adults through the day and allows them to forget about their problems and this aspect should not be ignored. The use of television in the home may actually be preventing these children from coming to more serious harm, by acting as a stress-reliever and stopping parents from lashing out.

One way to address these issues, Deidre suggested, is to make alternative means of parental support, such as parent and toddler groups, more accessible to these parents, but this means overcoming deep-rooted family culture to make them feel comfortable, connected and supported by people in the community, rather than by those they encounter on the

television. Changing these attitudes will be a very hard task but one that is especially important where the parents themselves grew up in homes that did not value books and reading.

Finally, Deidre was the first of many speakers during the day to point out that while we all now say “parents”, what we really mean most of the time is mothers, who still carry most of the burden of childcare. And for them, the joy of watching children growing up can be drowned out when life becomes just too gruelling.

Research review

National Literacy Trust director **Neil McClelland** provided a summary of the research review carried on behalf of the Trust by Dr Robin Close (available to download from www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/tv.html). He started by pointing out that the review was the result of substantial consultation carried out by the Talk To Your Baby campaign to find out what the most pressing issues around language development are for practitioners. He also stressed that television is just one component which has an impact.

The most surprising aspect of the review, he said, was how little research exists on this important subject. Much of the published evidence that does exist has focused on specific programmes, rather than the impact of television viewing generally.

The literature identifies many factors that appear to influence the impact of television on language development. These include the age-appropriateness of the content, whether the set is on in the background or being watched attentively by the child, the time spent viewing, and whether or not an adult participates in the viewing process. It has been suggested that language delay may be the result of a lack of interaction when children view television alone in their bedrooms. Neil pointed out that this was a recurring concern for practitioners during the consultation process, and is often reported in the press.

While the review addressed issues from birth to five, there are clear differences in the impact on younger and older children in this age range. Although it is inconclusive, research suggests that children under two are unable to cope with high levels of visual stimulation, so programmes with a single adult speaker are best; but they can still learn more by interacting with an adult than watching television. For children aged two to five, evidence shows that high-quality ‘educational’ programmes designed for their age group can enhance language development. But watching a high quantity of general audience programming is correlated with impaired skills. There are also issues around younger siblings watching with older ones, and consequently viewing programmes not appropriate for their age.

Neil said he found statistics on the prevalence of televisions in young children’s bedrooms to be alarming, and that much more research is needed on the impact of this relatively recent trend, particularly for under-twos since the research suggests they are not learning anything from it. Further research is also needed to establish an appropriate amount of viewing, and the effects of the television being on constantly in the background.

Practitioners need to ask themselves what creates the home circumstances or culture where children watch age-appropriate television and interact with parents in a supportive manner. This is particularly true for children aged two to three, when more exposure to the right programmes can be particularly beneficial.

Neil finished by reiterating that television is neither the cause of nor the answer to the language issues the conference was discussing. Research has shown television can be

beneficial – but carers must select the right programmes and limit viewing of others. He summed this up with a quote from the review: “If the environmental influences of child language acquisition were thought of as a four-course dinner, then the place of television input is as one of the options on the dessert plate.” Naigles and Mayeux (2001)

Academic panel

Dr Jackie Marsh, senior lecturer in education at the University of Sheffield, opened the academic panel by congratulating the Trust on its foresight in hosting the conference at such a critical time. She focused on television’s place in children’s cultural worlds, pointing out that there have always been high levels of anxiety about children’s culture. However, an approach that defines children by powerlessness and dependence on adult guidance, she said, does not acknowledge their role in influencing and changing their own culture.

It is often forgotten that television is just one element of children’s lives. Encountering the same narratives across a wide range of other media – including toys, books, computers, games, film and video, stickers, magazines, rhymes, stationery and even bed linen – helps children to understand how narratives shift depending on the medium. This is not to suggest that the commercialisation of childhood is providing extra opportunities; rather it is replacing some that no longer exist.

Jackie drew on her own research in Sheffield, which has focused on popular culture and wider literacy skills, rather than just language issues. Her experience has shown that television is the lingua franca of the playground and so can be used with children who have poor English language, or who are not otherwise excited by reading and writing activities. She gave examples of ways Teletubbies had been used in Sheffield to stimulate literacy activities, for example, writing recipes for Tubby custard.

Family literacy work around Teletubbies showed that it can be highly motivating for both children and parents, as they are also familiar with the show’s narratives and have seen their children’s positive responses to the characters at home. Jackie used the example of ‘media boxes’ based on the Storysacks concept, which have been developed by Philippa Thomson at Sheffield Education and Childcare Service.

Jackie disagreed with the conclusions drawn by Krcmar, Grela and Lin (2004), included in the NLT research review, that children under 22 months are incapable of acquiring information or learning new words from television. She quoted from another recent study (Roberts and Howard, in press) which has shown children aged 14 to 22 months responding to television content, such as pointing upwards or outside to the sky during a film of clouds and labelling the objects by saying “clouds”.

The Sheffield research showed that parents are very positive about the impact that television can have on children’s language and wider learning, and Jackie cited many examples, including one parent who believed that watching Wheel of Fortune had helped her son to learn the alphabet. Others showed children learning about songs and rhymes, or the social aspects of attending a crèche. And watching television was not a solitary or sedentary activity for these children. In the homes included in the study, the area around the television was often marked out as a space for television-related play, with parents providing a range of resources to support this.

However, while feeling positive about television’s role, many parents expressed guilt about ignoring what teachers say they should be doing to limit the amount of television watched by

children. Their own experience led them to conclude that it is not harmful – as far as they were concerned, their children were developing normally.

Parents felt that teachers underestimated the positive role of television, and 70% thought that media should be included in the nursery and school curriculum. Jackie agreed that television needs to take a central place in the curriculum, so that children can learn about television as well as from it.

Jackie summed up by saying that educationalists have much to learn from programme makers about how children engage with media and how they learn from it. She also pointed out that we should be very careful about imposing one socio-economic class's views on another. She reminded the audience that we need to be realistic about how children use television. Not all programming needs to be 'educational' – children need pleasurable television as much as adults.

James Law, professor of language and communication science at City University, London, opened by highlighting that television has been cited as the cause of every kind of social ill since its invention – violence, drug taking, government dishonesty, obesity and so on. He also pointed out an apparent contradiction in what we know about language development. At one level, language is not taught but 'acquired', and children will learn language in spite of what goes on around them rather than because of it.

This 'negativist' view of language is argued by Noam Chomsky and Stephen Pinker. Pinker has pointed out that the use of 'motherese' to teach children to speak is a cultural phenomenon and not essential to children's language development. Therefore, we need to be careful when drawing conclusions about input/output relationships. From a very early age, James said, an infant is actively searching for linguistic stimuli. The parsing process also starts to take place very early, to make sense of the stream of words they hear. Syntax isn't taught in the early years and most of what we say to children at this time is fairly ungrammatical.

Before talking about the impact of television on children's language development, we need to define many issues. What kind of television viewing do we mean – ambient, vicarious or focused? Do we include wider cultural input from games consoles, videos, educational television and even radio? And what we are developing their skills for – to chat with parents, to negotiate with peers, to talk to teachers, to get good SATs grades or to get a good job?

Even once these issues are clearly defined, James said, it may be hard to accurately measure the impact of television, given the number of things that go on in a child's life. Only a radical experiment would be able to isolate a child from all the other factors involved. He quoted research in "natural experiment" conditions (Sachs, Johnston and Bard, 1981), involving hearing children of deaf parents, which demonstrated that with very little social contact apart from television, the children developed some language but were very behind when identified. They then caught up with intervention.

There have been suggestions that background television can impair children's language development during infancy because it interferes with their ability to listen to language around them. James countered these with recent evidence from Alston and St James-Roberts, who studied 30 children aged eight to 10 months who had been identified as having poor listening skills, and compared their use of television to that of 30 age and gender-matched children without such difficulties. The study found that while the group with poor listening skills interacted with parents less, and showed lower levels of babbling, there was

no indication they watched more television. In fact, the group with listening difficulties, spent less time watching television than those without difficulties.

While the children in the above study were relatively advantaged, James also quoted a study at the other end of the social spectrum, with an inner-city population of slow language learners. A total of 189 children aged two-and-a-half were screened for speech and language difficulties: 50 were classified as having difficulties and the other 139 as 'language normal' (which, in terms of the demographic, would make them above average in skills). Almost three-quarters of children with language difficulties were said by their parents to watch television never, rarely or only with supervision. However, James pointed out, given the characteristics of the group (low levels of interaction with parents, poor attention) they probably wouldn't be predisposed to watch much television.

Like Jackie Marsh, James referred to the significance of age two in the research literature, and the suggestion that before this age children are incapable of learning new words from television (Krcmar, Grela and Lin, 2003). He pointed out that it is not that children don't learn any words at all before this; rather that they learn about the process of learning words from interaction with adults. Children are not able to benefit from educational programmes until they are able to learn independently.

James concluded that television is not the villain of the piece but it may well be the accomplice for some children. He expressed his optimism that the media's current fascination with "designer pregnancy" – manifested in coverage of pregnant celebrities – may be extended to provide high-profile role models for parents of how they should deal with television around very young children.

Dr Maria Rhode, professor of child psychotherapy at the Tavistock Clinic and the University of East London, ended the academic panel by looking at the emotional factors involved with television. Her focus was on the children's creative relationship to television, which affects how they can later use what they learn.

She highlighted the importance of shared attention between carers and babies in giving children their first indication that the parent has a mind of their own. This forms what Hobson called the "relatedness triangle", between the parent, the child and the object (television). The triangle teaches the child not just about the world but also about how the parent relates to the world. This social referencing has an important connection to joint viewing of television.

Babies have a very vivid emotional and imaginative life, and television can do much to enhance this. Maria used an example from an infant observation carried out by one of her students. While watching *Fimbles*, a children's television programme, baby Henry looked at the observer, the television, his food, then the observer again. Hearing the voice of his grandmother in the kitchen, he squashed some food under his finger, and vocalised at it. He then responded to his food by bouncing up and down in imitation of a character on the television. This sequence shows, she said, that Henry is interacting with all the elements around him. Television did not stop this – it became part of it.

If a child has a strong sense of their own identity, television can enrich it. Henry knows he is not a *Fimbles* character, but he imitates and interacts as one. Maria then gave a contrasting example of an autistic child who was not able to make this distinction. When he began to behave as though he was a sheep, no one could work out why – until it was noticed his parents had a sheep screen-saver on their home computer.

Both of these examples show that the power of television is immense. To children it is a fascinating alternative world, as we see when they look behind the set to ‘find’ what they have seen on screen. Like Jackie Marsh, Maria highlighted that the shared culture of children’s television can be an enormous aid to communication and imagination. However, parents and practitioners need to have an awareness of this culture in order to understand when children make references to it. This applies particularly in the case of autism.

Maria concluded by agreeing with other presenters that the distinction between educational and entertainment in children’s television is not always useful – how can you expect children to learn from something that is not entertaining or fun? Television is a medium of enormous potential benefit, but this is dependent on both the nature of the material and the emotional context.

Programme makers

Clare Elstow, head of pre-school at CBBC, opened the afternoon’s focus on programme makers with an overview of the BBC’s provision for children from birth to five years. She stated that, from their experience, it is a myth that pre-school television viewing is a passive experience. All their programmes encourage children to join in, sing along and copy actions. There is also a huge audience for further interactivity – the CBeebies website is the third most popular within the BBC.

Clare agreed with previous presenters that children’s programming must be entertaining. Children learn more effectively if they’re enjoying what they’re doing, and this is reflected in CBeebies’ key message – “Learning through play”. Programme makers don’t expect children to be watching 24 hours a day. CBeebies programmes are shown in four-hour repeated blocks to provide flexible viewing opportunities throughout the day, to fit in around nursery school classes or other family activities.

Clare used a couple of CBeebies programmes to explain how they are structured to encourage interaction. *Tikabilla* is a magazine-format show combining song, rhyme and “real world” items, each of which encourage children to join in, try it out after the programme or look for something similar in their own homes. A puppet character plays the role of the surrogate child, asking the questions the viewers might want to ask. Close camera work allows eye contact with the presenter and synchronisation of the sound with lip movements.

Tweenies takes the social setting of a playgroup, providing a way in for those who either don’t or can’t attend a playgroup themselves, and opportunities for comparison for those who do. The characters deal with emotional issues, providing both adults and children with a model of how they can be dealt with sensitively to avoid conflict.

Storymakers, set in a children’s library, also uses puppet characters as surrogate children. Each episode generates three new stories using a “story machine” and the focus is on introducing new and imaginative vocabulary. The presenter gives prompts to adults on topics to talk to their children about later.

For less confident parents, or those who would like a few starters, CBeebies is looking at the potential of a new interactive service – working title *Chatterbox* – that could be accessed via the handset’s red button. Text at the bottom of the screen could be used to provide background information, themes, characters, possible learning outcomes, or specific questions to try.

Something Special is a series designed for children with learning difficulties. The first four episodes were transmitted as a pilot during schools' programming and a further 16 are being made to go out during regular CBeebies programming. Each includes Makaton signing and symbols, films of children's lives and activities, and a comedy mime element, but the pace is gentle and it is very simply shot. It is anticipated that the new episodes' audience will not be restricted to children with learning difficulties.

Clare pointed out that television is a hugely expensive medium, even at the budget end. It involves significant planning and pre and post-production work. Creative teams must be able to see the world through the eyes of a pre-school child so keeping in touch with the audience is essential. CBeebies programmes also integrate early learning goals so they often work with education advisers.

However, while providing quality programmes with high production values, Clare pointed out that they cannot watch the programme with the children so must rely on parents to be the gatekeepers to their children's viewing. She hoped that this meant they would be watching together. CBeebies has created a children's culture, and current work with primary education consultant Sue Palmer is developing ways of building on this shared culture in foundation stage education.

The discussion of programme making was continued by **Iain Lauchlan**, joint chief executive of Tell-Tale Productions and series producer/co-creator of Tweenies. In a perfect world, he said, perfect programmes would be made by perfect programme makers, and watched by perfect children with their perfect parents. Unfortunately, however, the real world is not like that. Iain highlighted the three elements that must be considered in programme making: the age range of the children, the purpose of the programme and the content. Programme makers must consider whether they want to reach under-twos, three to five-year-olds, or all under-fives. They must also have very clear ideas of *why* they want to make the programme. Will it cover a specific issue, or topic? Contrary to what many believe, programmes are not constructed around a single character or group of characters. Finally comes content, which will be largely determined by the target age range. However, Iain said he also believes that the content must be aspirational since children always want to be older than they are. If it appeals to them in this way, they will stay with it longer. But at the same time, it must also be entertaining.

Tweenies was created when the BBC wanted a programme specifically for three to five-year-olds to run alongside Teletubbies. Tell-Tale realised that adults watch their peers on television all the time but that pre-school children had no opportunity to do the same. Like adults, children can lock into the characters like a soap opera, and care about them. Tell-Tale also wanted to give children a programme on issues they could relate to – stories, songs, friendships – in which characters acted, spoke and moved as they did.

Television is used in Tweenies only as a window into the real world, showing information in a positive way. In fact, Iain said, long discussions were held about how the characters should be shown watching television – lying down, on beanbags, on chairs? It was decided that they would be sitting on chairs in order to move away from the “couch potato” image. The clips shown on the Tweenies' television feature real-life footage, with voiceovers from the characters to provide the child's perspective.

Each Tweenies episode has a clear story progression and gives parents something to talk about with their children afterwards. In this way, Iain said, pre-school children's television can provide the foundations for formal education without being overt.

Iain used the example of another Tell-Tale production, *Boo!*, to show that animation, which can be seen as cheap and poor quality, is capable of providing the same quality experience if it goes through careful production processes. Animation for children allows programme makers to show a wide range of environments – some which the child may have visited, some they have not – and broaden children’s knowledge and vocabulary. This is what *Boo!* aims to do.

Iain finished by calling for more opportunities for programme makers and educationalists to get together to talk over the issues around television and learning. This must be done, he said, in order to get it absolutely right.

The final keynote speaker was **Anne Wood**, founder and creative director of Ragdoll Ltd and producer/co-creator of *Teletubbies*. Anne opened by expressing her surprise that, so long after its invention, television is still considered a threat to education or literacy skills. She said that, when it comes to television, literacy means something different and we have betrayed children by not welcoming and considering this difference enough. This defensive position, she admitted, is partly brought about by the initial criticism of *Teletubbies*.

Television is a visual art and *Teletubbies* assumes a developing imaginative awareness. But adults were concerned that they could not supervise the conversation taking place between the television and the child because they did not understand it. It did not follow the conventional discourse of the classroom, with an adult telling the child what to do, so people thought children wouldn’t be able to understand either. They were not aware, Anne said, of television’s relationship to children and their ability to imagine long before they can talk.

Anne had since received lots of unsolicited tapes made by parents and childminders of children watching and responding to *Teletubbies*. She used examples from these to illustrate that children are not passive when watching the programme. Like book reading, television needs the active participation of the viewer. Both books and television use symbols and grammar to create meaning but they are different for each, and offer children different experiences. *Teletubbies* is important, she said, because it was the first programme to reveal some of these differences, and it did so on behalf of very young children who were not supposed to be watching television.

The aim of *Teletubbies* was to encourage children’s thinking skills by creating programmes that they could watch and understand without an adult presenter to interpret what they are seeing for them. Having an adult presenter, Anne said, is not always a sign of responsibility in children’s programming.

For young children, she added, thought is feeling and vice versa. *Teletubbies* aims to develop their empathy as well as their competence as viewers; they are not passive participants. Programme makers need to understand the difference between adults and children and reflect this in their output. Television is not a classroom, she said, it is an art form. Unless it is seen as an opportunity and not a threat, there will be less risk-taking and so less groundbreaking television.

The problem with initiatives such as *Talk To Your Baby*, Anne said, is that they can be misrepresented in the press. Talking and listening to children is what develops language skills – it should not be a case of television versus learning, or an opportunity to turn the spotlight on viewing habits in individuals’ homes. Research on the impact of television on early language has not proved conclusive so it is irresponsible of academics and the press to indicate otherwise. These kinds of attitudes only raise anxiety and so endanger quality programme making, particularly at a time when it is already hard to get money for it.

Anne closed by reiterating that television should be seen as a precursor to other forms of literacy. It is the first technology a child encounters and so should be used as an opportunity to develop the decoding skills a child needs to understand the 'grammar' of television. She is tired of having to defend children's right to watch the best television on offer. Television has the capacity to be effective, entertaining, stimulating – even beautiful and enriching. The fact that not all children's programming is all these things is not the fault of the children, or of the medium.

Discussion groups

During the afternoon, delegates were asked to discuss the following issues:

1. What are the key messages for parents and carers?
2. What are the best ways to communicate these?

A summary of the groups' responses is below. Where more than one group made the same point, the number of times the point was made is included in brackets.

1. What are the key messages for parents and carers?

The most commonly quoted key message for parents and carers was that they should be discriminating about their children's television viewing – what they are watching, how often the set is on, how much it is being used as a “babysitter”. This acknowledges what research evidence suggests about the importance of age-appropriate programmes. However, it also raises questions that research cannot yet answer, such as how much is an “appropriate amount” of viewing for children.

The second most common key message suggested was related to the first: parents and carers should watch with children so that they can share experiences, respond to opportunities for talking and understand children's culture. It is in this way that parents will increase their understanding of what their children are watching and help to “interpret” content for them. It could also provide valuable “cuddle time”, delegates remarked.

Other comments suggested that parents should consider television as one aspect of a varied mix of media that can be used in the home to entertain and educate their children.

- **Know what your child is watching.** Be discriminating and get the balance right. Be aware of the role television plays in the home and how much it is on – is it “babysitting”? Children's viewing should be age-appropriate and not “excessive”. (There are issues on what parents should be told is the “right” amount of television for children. The research evidence is not clear. Parents also need guidance on what viewing is “age appropriate” for their child. Two groups suggested parenting education in school as a way of communicating the issues). **(23)**
- **Watch with your child to share experiences.** This provides talking points and helps parents to understand children's culture. It can also provide “cuddle time”. **(21)**
- **Television is not a bad thing.** It should be seen as an ally and part of the “mix”. Research shows its impact can be positive and is a part of a child's life experiences. **(9)**
- **Very young children need interactive language.** Television is not a substitute for parent's time and attention. Children need talking and listening to, and physical/emotional involvement with an adult. They also need opportunities for real-life talk and play. Research suggests that less television and more adult intervention is beneficial for children under 22 months. **(7)**
- **Don't put televisions in young children's bedrooms** (under-fours?). If a child is watching television alone in their bedroom, they might not be getting the best out of it – interaction is important. **(5)**
- **Don't feel guilty.** Parents should be able to use television as “time out”. **(5)**
- **Build programmes into your routine.** For example, using CBeebies' bedtime hour. **(2)**

- **Differentiate viewing.** Older children will have different needs from younger ones, and parents will have other needs. (2)
- **Discourage use of television as background noise.** Avoid the use of the set as a “noisy lightbulb”.
- **Repetition is a positive thing.** There are benefits from children watching the same video many times.

Other comments

- Establish clear messages – among professionals first.
- Children have to learn how to learn before they can learn from television.
- Encourage older children to watch and discuss documentary programmes.
- Children have a right to their own culture (including noise and disorder) just as parents have rights to quiet and order.
- Using our own children as exemplars can blind us to what other children might do in the same situation.
- Rules are usually counter-productive and give television more status than it deserves.
- Please care.
- Be braver in allowing children’s play – especially outdoors.
- There is both good and bad children’s television.
- Encourage viewing of quality UK programming.
- You can’t generalise about the child and television – there are all kinds of children and all kinds of television.

2. What are the best ways to communicate these?

Responses are grouped into media, peer and community back-up, education, and general points.

The most common comment was that parents need to receive the same message from all professionals. This can only be achieved with significant support from the full range of childcare professionals and others linked to education. Media support for this was also seen as crucial; many groups suggested a major public service initiative or using popular culture such as soap operas and daytime magazine programmes to raise the issues and provide examples of how parents can use television positively. Other media including radio, the internet, billboards, and packaging for children’s toys were also mentioned – what is important is the message rather than the medium. The use of celebrity role models was also mentioned by many.

However, the importance of peer support should not be underestimated. Others mentioned parent and toddler groups and early years librarians as being the main influencers of parents.

Media

- **Raise issues in popular adult shows.** For example, soaps can show parents interacting with children’s television as part of a storyline (and they should avoid using babies as props). (11)
- **Use famous names in media.** Celebrity role models can provide high-profile exemplars. (8)
- **Public service messages.** The medium is not important as long as the message is the same throughout. Popular culture should be used to promote the issues. (5)

- **Fun funky ads.** On television, radio, internet and billboards, perhaps using celebrities talking about their favourite programme to encourage discussion. **(4)**
- **Introductory information slots within children’s television.** Give guidance to parents/carers on how they might help their children get the best out of the programme or actively include them in the programme. **(4)**
- **Television programmes for adults.** Chat shows, documentaries and daytime magazine programmes such as Tricia and This Morning can be used to drip feed the message over time. **(3)**
- **Don’t separate television from wider media choices.** Children’s computer games, videos and so on should also be considered.
- Popular magazines.
- Open honest debate in the media.
- Media education at all levels is the most effective proven strategy.
- Forge better links between broadcasters and playgroups/schools/the wider school community to open up dialogue in advance of new programming.
- Provide information about wide range of programmes for children.

Peer and community back-up

- **Ensure parents receive the same message from all professionals.** There should be massive back up through relevant childcare professionals and organizations – Sure Start, Bookstart, midwives, nursery workers, health visitors – and other government departments linked with learning. **(16)**
- **Peer support.** Parent/toddler groups, library under-fives’ events and toddlers’ groups are the main influencers of parental behaviour. **(4)**
- **See the issues through parents’ eyes.** Professionals must start from where parents/carers are at and approach issues with sensitivity. **(2)**
- **Provide basic tips.** Use leaflets that reflect the culture of the target audience. **(2)**
- **Outreach family workers.** Can help identify children with special needs or families who need support.

Education

- **Family literacy programmes.** For example, sessions in libraries etc. **(3)**
- **Include in personal, social and health education in schools.** Messages will reach children before they become parents themselves. **(2)**
- Media education is the best proven strategy.

General points

- Parenting skills lessons and support **(2)**
- Avoid rigid rules as they are usually counter-productive.
- Conferences to discuss issues.
- Raise awareness among parents and professionals about early language development and how to support it.
- Include information on packaging for children’s toys and cereal packets, providing ideas for sharing play.
- Early years teachers should watch the programmes to understand the children’ culture.
- Better representation in the media of the positive aspects of television viewing.
- Model using television as a starter for talk, for example by using “media boxes” (along the lines of Storysacks for reading) during home visits by professionals.

Appendix

Speaker biographies

Liz Attenborough manages the Talk To Your Baby campaign at the National Literacy Trust. She was a children's book publisher for over 20 years, with 12 years as publisher at Puffin Books. From 1998 to 1999 she was director of the National Year of Reading. The following year she studied for an MA in Child Studies at King's College, London.

In addition to her work on Talk to Your Baby, Liz is involved in a number of different charities, all to do with children or reading or both. These include being a trustee of The Reading Agency, a trustee of the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre (soon to be established in Great Missenden) and being on the advisory committee of Bookstart.

Deidre Sanders has been problem page editor of *The Sun* since 1980 and her 'agony' column has been published daily since 1987.

She is a trustee of the National Family and Parenting Institute, an associate of the Royal Society of Medicine, an honorary council member of the NSPCC, a member of the British Association of Counselling and of the National Commission of Inquiry into the Prevention of Child Abuse, and a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. Before her advice column in *The Sun* – for which she was nominated for a life-time achievement press award in 2000 – she wrote for *The Sunday Times*, *Woman's Own* and *Nova* magazine.

Neil McClelland is director of the National Literacy Trust where he has worked since the Trust's inauguration in 1993. He started his career as a teacher and then entered educational administration – becoming Deputy Director of Schools for the Inner London Education Authority, and immediately prior to joining the National Literacy Trust, Director of Education for the London Borough of Greenwich.

He was co-editor and contributor to *Teaching and Learning in Cities* (Whitbread, 1993) and *Building a Literate Nation* (Trentham Books, 1997). He has served on various government advisory groups, including recently the DCMS's Stakeholders' Group for Framework for the Future, for libraries.

Dr Jackie Marsh is a senior lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Sheffield and is involved in research relating to the use of popular culture and media in the early childhood literacy curriculum. She is one of the founding editors of the *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* and the co-editor of the *Handbook of Early Literacy Research* (Sage, 2003), an international review of research in the field.

James Law is professor and Head of the Department of Language and Communication Science at City University, London

He has been principal investigator on a number of funded research projects. In 1998 he completed a systematic review into interventions for language delayed children and updated this in 2003 with a review now published by the Cochrane Collaboration. He has since led a team looking at the effective collaboration between education and health services in the provision Children With Speech And Language Needs in England and Wales and has also completed a study evaluating early years provision for the charity I CAN. He is currently working on a project setting the language baseline for the national Sure Start programme.

Dr Maria Rhode is professor of child psychotherapy at the Tavistock Clinic and University of East London. She has a special interest in communication disorders, and is co-editor of *Psychotic States in Children* (Tavistock/Duckworth, 1997), and of *The Many Faces of Asperger's Syndrome* (Tavistock/Karnac, 2004).

Clare Elstow heads up CBBC's Pre-school Unit and is responsible for a range of pre-school 'live action' series, including *Tikkabilla*, *Story Makers*, a new pre-school dance, movement and music series, and *Something Special*, a series aimed at children with learning difficulties. She also works with independent production companies on BBC commissions, and has provided editorial content for *Fimbles*, *Tweenies* and *Teletubbies*.

Clare has worked in educational broadcasting and spent over 15 years making programmes for schools' TV; she retains an interest in educational and curriculum developments. Clare leads a team of pre-school focused staff, specialists in producing age-appropriate programmes which are both entertaining and educational.

Iain Lauchlan was born in Scotland and after training at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama worked as an actor in the TV and theatre circuit north of the border until 1980. In 1981 Iain became a presenter on BBC's *Playschool* and spent the next 8 years being a regular presenter on the series as well as doing *Fingermouse* and eventually *Playdays*. While presenting *Playdays* Iain became a producer and produced *Whybird Stop*, *Roundabout Stop* and *Poppy Stop* for the programme and has been involved with creating and producing children's programmes ever since. Since 1994 Iain has been joint chief executive of Tell-Tale Productions and has been co-creator and co-producer of *Fun Song Factory*, *Tweenies* and *Boo*.

Anne Wood is the founder and creative director of Ragdoll, whose work is loved by children around the world. Since 1985, Ragdoll has produced more than 1,300 programmes aimed at the youngest viewers.

Anne holds a passionate belief that television has an important role in developing children's imaginative resources and her experience as a teacher lead her to new ways of experimenting with storytelling on television.

Ragdoll is dedicated to working for young children and is founded on the belief that children live in the same world as the rest of us, but perceive it differently. Ragdoll's objective is to make children smile by producing work that is both funny, reassuring and, therefore, empowering for children.