Most people seem to agree that children have distinct tastes when it comes to consuming entertainment. Although little is known about how these tastes are formed during childhood, it has been shown that even toddlers firmly express their tastes and preferences regarding what they want to eat, wear, watch, or play with (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995). It has also been shown that as children mature they become increasingly able to voice sophisticated and critical views about television entertainment programs (Clifford, Gunter, & McAleer, 1995). Program producers and marketers of child products have undoubtedly gathered valuable information about what children in different age groups like in commercials and entertainment programs. However, their research findings are, in most cases, not accessible to the academic world. In academic circles, there has been very little systematic research on children's opinions about and preferences for television entertainment programs, and no reviews organizing the existing literature.

One thing that makes the study of children’s preferences for entertainment so interesting and so valuable is that children usually watch entertainment programming not because they are told to, but because they want to. Although children might tune into educational programs because of encouragement from their parents or teachers, children often choose entertainment programs without being encouraged to by an authority figure and sometimes in spite of being discouraged to do so by an adult. Because children often choose entertainment programming for their own...
enjoyment, studying what children prefer to watch may give researchers insight into the various
types of gratifications that viewing may provide.

Children might enjoy entertainment programs for a variety of reasons, including differences
in experiences, differences in predispositions or temperament, and differences in cognitive and
emotional development. According to research that has been conducted thus far, two factors that
have been shown to be important antecedents of children’s preference for entertainment are their
age, or developmental level (Mielke, 1983; Sheldon & Loncar, 1996; Valkenburg & Janssen, 1999)
and their gender (Cantor, 1998a; Valkenburg & Janssen, 1999). Because of the important role of
both age and gender in children’s viewing preferences, we have organized this chapter according
to these major themes.

Cognitive Development and Children’s Likes and Dislikes

Cognitive developmental theories have been used to explain a variety of differences in the
way children respond to mass media, including their comprehension of the motivations and
consequences underlying stories, their reactions to television advertising, and their fright
reactions. In this chapter, we investigate the extent to which cognitive developmental differences
play a role in determining children’s likes and dislikes for entertaining programming. On the
basis of a review of the existing literature on preschoolers’ (Acuff, 1997; Cupitt, Jenkinson,
Ungerer, & Waters, 1998; Jaglom & Gardner, 1981; Rosengren & Windahl, 1989), and
elementary school children’s (Acuff, 1997; Gunter et al., 1991; Valkenburg & Janssen, 1999)
preferences for entertainment, we will discuss and hypothesize how children’s developmental
level might influence their preferences for different types of entertainment programs.

Early Childhood: Ages Two to Seven

Many theories of cognitive development distinguish the preschool and early elementary school
years from the later elementary school years. Piaget refers to this period as “preoperational,”
although many non-Piagetians attribute specific characteristics to this age group without using the
preoperational label. Although a 2-year-old differs from a 7-year-old in many respects,
preschoolers and young elementary school children do share certain cognitive-developmental characteristics that justify segmenting them in this way. We will explain some of these characteristics and discuss how they might affect children’s evaluative judgments of entertainment programs.

**Limited Information Processing Capacity**

Children of all ages strive to understand their environment, whether it surrounds them in real life or is presented to them on television. According to Piaget (1954), there seems to be an innate need in children to find order, structure and predictability in their environment. When children can explain and process the events they experience, their world makes sense to them and they have equilibrium. When children cannot understand their external world, they are in a state of cognitive disequilibrium (conflict), and, to resolve this disharmonious state, they begin a search for a better level of understanding. Children have often been shown to display a preference for stimuli that they can understand or incorporate at least partially within their existing conceptual framework, and to show little preference for extremely simple or extremely complex stimuli (Flavell, Miller, & Miller; 1993; Siegler, 1991). According to the moderate-discrepancy hypothesis, which is formulated to explain these observations, infants and preschoolers prefer to look at objects that are moderately discrepant from what they know or are capable of (Siegler, 1991). Of course, the meaning of complexity changes dramatically as a child matures. Information that is too complex for a two-year old may seem overly simple to a four-year-old.

Although we know of no research on the effect of children’s cognitive abilities on their likes and dislikes in entertainment, some circumstantial evidence does exist. Observational studies of children’s attention to television have shown, for example, that children prefer to watch television content that is easily understood (Anderson & Burns, 1991), and that children avoid television that they cannot understand (Wright & Huston, 1981). It must be noted, however, that although attention is a necessary condition for the appreciation of television content, it is not a sufficient one. It has been observed that children can involuntary pay attention to certain aversive
television content (e.g., starving children, survivors of a bombing) that they don’t appreciate at all (Cantor, 1998b) -- an issue we will return to at the end of this chapter. Research on children’s self-reports of what they like does suggest, however, that comprehension of entertainment shows is one of the most important determinants of selecting and enjoying them (Valkenburg & Janssen, 1999).

Because for young children, so much information goes beyond their existing knowledge and experiences, and because their information-processing capacity is limited, young children need more time than adults to interpret and make sense of television images. This is the reason why young preschoolers often are not attracted to fast-paced programming with rapidly-changing images (Acuff, 1997). Programs with a slow pace and with lots of repetition, such as Barney and Friends, Blues Clues, and Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, are more attuned to the needs of this age group (Acuff, 1997). It also explains why young preschoolers often prefer familiar contexts and visuals (Lemish, 1987). For instance, they like to watch programs that show babies and young children (Lemish, 1987), and they adore nonthreatening real or animated animals, such as kind birds, friendly dinosaurs, and babyish creatures like the Teletubbies (Acuff, 1997; Cupitt et al., 1998). By the time they are five or six, children begin to develop a preference for more fast-paced programs. By that age, they often find slower-paced programs with friendly characters boring or childish (Acuff, 1997; Sheldon & Loncar, 1996). Because they are able to make sense of far more information, these children show greater persistence with content that is more difficult to understand (Anderson & Burns, 1991). At that time, they begin to prefer more adventurous themes located in foreign countries or in outer space, and more complicated characters (Acuff, 1997).

Unclear Fantasy-Reality Distinction

For the preoperational child, there is an unclear demarcation between fantasy and reality. Virtually anything is possible in this child’s imagination: A sponge can become a rock, bears can talk, and the wind can pick the child up and take him or her away. Research has shown that
between the ages of three and ten years, children gradually become more accurate in
distinguishing fantasy from reality on television (e.g., Morrison & Gardner, 1978). At first,
children believe that everything on television is real. Young preschoolers sometimes even think
the characters reside inside the TV set (Noble, 1975). Jaglom and Garder (1981), for instance,
observed that two- to three-year-olds ran to get a paper towel to clean up an egg they saw break on
television. In addition, most four-year-olds who participated in a study by Howard (1998) were
convinced that Big Bird and Bugs Bunny were real.

As children grow older, they at first judge content as real vs. unreal by focusing on
perceptual cues. Children begin to judge marked violations of physical reality, such as animation
and special effects as unreal (Dorr, 1983), but they continue to consider something that looks real
as real even if it is not. For example, although all of the 5- to 6-year-olds in Howard’s (1998)
study knew that Big Bird was a man dressed in a costume, many 9- to 10-year-olds thought that
the Huxtables (on The Cosby Show) were a real family.

Children’s failure to distinguish fantasy and reality can affect their likes and dislikes
regarding television in important ways. First, because fantasy and cartoon characters are
perceived as real, they can be just as attractive and engaging as real-life characters for
preoperational children. By the time they are three years old, children start to make statements
indicating attachment to television personalities (Jaglom & Gardner, 1981). But as they don’t
distinguish between fantasy and reality, they can just as easily focus their attraction on an animal
or a fantasy character as on a real-life character. Another implication of children’s limited
understanding of fantasy and reality is that some special effects or stunts, such as a character
vanishing in a puff of smoke, can have a great impact on preoperational children. Because they
cannot put these events in perspective by understanding that they are cinematic tricks, young
children may be more strongly affected by them.

Perceptual Boundedness and Centration
Another quality of preschoolers’ thinking is the tendency to center attention on the immediately perceptible attributes of a display, often ignoring other types of information that are less obvious or less visually prominent. This characteristic is sometimes referred to as perceptual boundedness (Bruner, 1966) or concreteness (Flavell, 1963). Research shows, for example that in evaluating characters, preschoolers weigh a character’s appearance more heavily than his or her behavior or motivations, information that is much less perceptually salient. In a controlled experiment in which a television character’s appearance (attractive vs. ugly) and behavior (kind vs. cruel) were manipulated, preschool children were more inclined than older children to say the ugly character was mean and the attractive character was nice, independently of how she had behaved. In contrast, older children’s evaluations were more influenced by the character’s behavior than by her looks (Hoffner & Cantor, 1985).

Closely related to perceptual boundedness is centration, the tendency to center attention on an individual, striking feature of an object or image, to the exclusion of other, less striking features. In other words, preoperational children are often unable to explore all aspects of a visual stimulus. When a child is presented with a stuffed bear with a big shiny bow, for example, the child may focus entirely on this bow, and ignore many other characteristics of the bear. In a qualitative study reported in Acuff (1997), 5- to 8-year-old girls were presented with three dolls. Two of the dolls were very expensive, had beautiful and realistic faces, and came with sophisticated mechanical effects. The third doll was much more cheaply made, but this doll had a big, red sequined heart on her dress. To the surprise of the researchers, the majority of the girls preferred the cheap doll with the sequined heart. The researchers explained their results with Piaget’s concept of centration. According to Acuff (1997), the striking feature became an object of centration ... to the exclusion of all other attributes.”

Young children’s tendency to focus on immediately perceptible, striking features of images has important implications for children’s entertainment programs. Children up to approximately five years are very visual in their orientation to the world and certainly to
characters. Their descriptions of television characters tend to fix on single, physical attributes, without integrating them into an overall picture (Jaglom & Gardner, 1981). They pay less attention to what characters are doing or saying, and pay most attention to simple, brightly colored visuals and colorful, uncomplicated, nonthreatening characters (Acuff, 1997; Jaglom & Gardner, 1981).

These tendencies have implications for emotional reactions as well. For example, children in this age group are more likely to be frightened by something in the media that is ugly or grotesque but is actually harmless, than by something that is dangerous but has a benign exterior (Cantor & Sparks, 1884).

Failure to Understand Transformations

Another characteristic of preoperational children is the failure to understand transformations. In responding primarily on the basis of the immediately perceptual aspects of a situation, the young child is much less affected by depicted causal relationships or changes from past to future states. A study by De Vries (1969) provides a convincing example of this quality of children’s thinking. Three- to six-year-olds in this study were allowed to pet a tame and friendly cat named Maynard. When the experimenter asked the children what Maynard was, all of them knew he was a cat. Then, while the children watched, the experimenter put a mask of a dog over Maynard’s head. She found that many of the three-year-olds thought that the animal had become a dog, while most six-year-olds knew it was still a cat no matter what it looked like (De Vries, 1969). This study demonstrates that preschoolers tend to focus on static states rather than transformations. The preschoolers ignored (or possibly forgot) the transformational process, during which the researcher had put the mask on the cat’s face.

Children’s entertainment programs often use transformations as a means to attract children. One thing that popular children’s programs such as The Incredible Hulk, Power Rangers, and the recent Animorphs have in common is that ordinary humans transform into very different-looking superheroes, complete with extraordinary talents, right before the viewers’ eyes.
These kinds of transformations have a very powerful impact on preoperational children, who often see a character’s multiple forms as separate characters (Sparks & Cantor, 1986).

Visual transformational events, therefore, often surprise and impress preschoolers (Acuff, 1997). As children grow older, they still enjoy transformations, but because they have a better grasp of cinematic conventions, the transformations become less impressive. Unfortunately, transformations can also induce fright because young children are not able yet to dismiss the transformation as unreal, and the notion that a seemingly normal person could suddenly become a grotesque monster is especially unsettling (Cantor, 1998b). In a survey conducted at the time that The Incredible Hulk appeared in prime-time television, 40% of the parents of preschool children who responded to the questionnaire spontaneously listed The Incredible Hulk as a program that had frightened their child (Cantor & Sparks, 1984). Similarly, in a survey among Dutch parents conducted in 1997, The Power Rangers was among the top three of programs inducing fright in young children (Valkenburg, 1999).

Responsiveness to Language

Children seem to have an innate tendency to respond to language. Long before infants talk, they are very responsive to human speech (Siegler, 1991), and they are especially attentive to a form of speech that is referred to as “motherese.” Motherese is characterized by a slower cadence, a higher pitch, and exaggerated intonations (Siegler, 1991). It has been shown that infants as young as four months clearly prefer to hear speech in motherese to speech in standard intonations (Fernald, 1985). Programs for toddlers sometimes make use of this style of speech (Cupitt et al., 1998).

Young preschoolers also like to listen to music, and they prefer rhythmic to non-rhythmic sounds (Siegler, 1991). In a study by Cupitt et al. (1998), almost half of the mothers of 2.5-year-olds reported that their child had imitated music, rhymes, or songs from television. This study also showed that nearly all of the 2.5-year olds had interacted with television programs while watching, for instance, by singing, dancing, or clapping hands. Because young children are so
Children’s Likes and Dislikes

Younger preoperational children’s limited language skills prevent them from appreciating some sophisticated forms of humor, such as world play, puns, and satire. Appropriate forms of humor for this age group are highly physical, visual forms of humor (e.g., clownish gestures), slapstick, and sudden surprises (Zillmann & Bryant, 1983). Preschoolers and young elementary school children dislike programs with humor that is too "grown-up" for them to understand (Sheldon & Loncar, 1996). Toward the latter part of the preoperational stage, however, children become more responsive to verbally-oriented shows, with more sophisticated forms of humor (Jaglom & Gardner, 1981), like The Simpsons.

Middle Childhood: Ages Eight Through Twelve

Piaget believed that the cognitive systems of early childhood (preoperational) and middle-childhood (concrete operational) thinkers are qualitatively different from one other. However, it is now generally believed that these differences are not that dramatic (Siegler, 1991). Still, many of the general trends that Piaget described hold up to empirical test even today (Flavell et al., 1993). We will discuss a number of qualities that characterize middle childhood and argue how these qualities may affect children’s perceptions of and preferences for entertainment programs.

Appreciation of the Fantasy-Reality Distinction

Throughout elementary school, children are increasingly able to distinguish the real from the unreal on television (e.g., Howard, 1998). Whereas the preoperational child’s fantasies are not bound by logical rules, the fantasies in middle childhood more often entail realistic and plausible themes. In this period, children become interested in real-world phenomena (Mielke, 1983), and they seek to discover reality in their toys, books, and entertainment programs. According to Gunter et al. (1991), the realism of the setting and characters in entertainment programs is an important determinant of children’s enjoyment of such programs. The children in their study were highly critical of entertainment that lacks realism, for instance, when actors...
behaved in an unlikely manner (Gunter et al., 1991). By the time children are nine years old, they are mainly interested in entertainment designed for adults (Rosengren & Windahl, 1989). In a study by Rosengren and Windahl (1989), 87% of the boys and 80% of the girls in third grade had an adult program as their main preference. Children say that one of the reasons they watch such programs is to be taught social lessons, such as how to behave in relationships (Gunter et al., 1991). This may explain why situation comedies featuring families are so popular with children.

In 1995 Nielsen ratings for children aged two to eleven, for example, nine of the top ten programs were in that category (Cantor, 1998a). However, while seeking information about the real world, these children still appreciate dramatic conflict, fast-paced action, and comic escapism. Programs combining both appeals seem to be most successful (Mielke, 1983). Children in middle childhood continue to like to watch animals, but they are mainly interested in real-life animals rather than fantasy creatures (Mielke, 1983). Because most fantasy characters have been demystified (Fernie, 1981), concrete-operational children tend to become attached to real-life heroes, such as sports heroes, movie stars, and action heroes (Acuff, 1997).

Decentration

With the developing ability to decenter, children come to appreciate details. As explained earlier, a preoperational child may focus on only one striking detail of a toy -- a doll’s clothing, for example. For the concrete-operational child, many characteristics of a toy may be carefully observed, from the face and body to details of the doll’s clothing to how it moves (Acuff, 1997). At this age, children become progressively critical of programs of low quality, such as those that are poorly produced or repetitious (Gunter et al., 1991). They are no longer content with simple, salient characteristics, such as a colorful cartoon character. Unlike preoperational children, who are greatly impressed by special effects and characters with special powers, older children seem to agree that special effects by themselves are not enough (Gunter et al., 1991).

Socio-Cognitive Development and Children’s Likes and Dislikes
Up to this point we have mainly discussed the impact of children’s cognitive development on their preferences for entertainment. Of course, children do not only strive to understand their physical surroundings but also their social environment. Social cognition includes recognizing and dealing with others’ emotions and understanding social relations and social customs (Flavell et al., 1993). In the next sections, we will focus on how children’s social-cognitive level affects their preferences for entertainment.

Understanding Others’ Emotions

Children’s ability to recognize and interpret others’ emotions gradually improves throughout early childhood. By age four or five, children can provide explanations for why their playmates are happy, angry, or sad, although they tend to rely primarily on visible cues, such as facial expressions (Flavell et al., 1993). As children rely more and more on both internal and external cues to interpret emotions, they improve greatly in their understanding of emotions. For example, they eventually recognize that more than one emotion can be experienced at the same time and that an emotion can be feigned (Flavell et al., 1993). It is no accident, therefore, that at this level of social-cognitive development, children start to recognize and dislike poor acting by protagonists in entertainment programs, for example, when actors in soaps display emotions in an unlikely and unconvincing way (Sheldon & Loncar, 1996).

Social Role-Taking Perspectives

Children’s ability to see the world from another’s perspective steadily increases between the preschool and older elementary school years (Durkin, 1997). During early and middle childhood, children develop from mainly egocentric beings (roughly 3 years old), who are unaware of any social perspective (thoughts, feelings) other than their own, to advanced “role takers” (roughly 12-15+), who are capable of putting themselves in another person’s shoes, can simultaneously consider different points of view, and anticipate and understand how others will react in different situations.
As children acquire role-taking skills, their understanding of human relationships changes. Whereas preschoolers think that any pleasant interaction with available playmates qualifies those playmates as “friends,” 8- to 10-year-olds appreciate how their interests and those of their peers can be similar or different, and they look for friends who are psychologically similar to themselves (Selman, 1980).

Children’s growing abilities to role take not only affect the way in which they deal with real-life persons, they also affect their likes and dislikes for characters in entertainment programs. Research has shown that children in middle childhood begin to enjoy watching television characters who seem psychologically similar to themselves (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Whereas preschoolers tend to rely on physical similarities between themselves and characters (e.g., I have eyes like Superman), or create them in their imagination, older children rely more heavily on psychological and social aspects of a character’s personality (Fernie, 1981). Witnessing similar characters allows the child to observe a variety of events and outcomes that may be potentially relevant to his or her own life. It stands to reason, therefore, that children pay more attention to the actions of same-sex characters (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991), and that they dislike watching characters who are younger than themselves (Mielke, 1983). Research has shown that children prefer to watch actors at least their own age, or teenagers and young adults (Sheldon & Loncar, 1996). In a study that had children explain why they prefer to see adults, children indicated that adults were involved in more interesting and exciting activities, that they were better actors, and had better roles than children (Sheldon & Loncar, 1996).

Enjoyment of media entertainment is not always predicted by perceived similarity to a character (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Heroes like Superman and “A larger than life” characters are undoubtedly dissimilar to most child viewers. Still, children are very much attracted to films and programs featuring characters like this. Rather than feeling similar, children see these characters as someone to emulate. Children enjoy vicariously participating in the behaviors of someone they admire and would like to resemble but whom they don’t have the capacity to imitate. Wishful
identification (von Feilitzen & Linne, 1975) with admirable characters can help children feel more powerful at a time when they are struggling with real-life problems that are not instantaneously resolved. Because boys and girls differ in the media characters they admire (Hoffner, 1996), we will discuss their preferences for characters in the next section of this chapter, on the relationship between gender and preferences for entertainment.

Influence of Peer Groups

Peer interactions become increasingly sophisticated among school-aged children (Durkin, 1997). A peer group in middle childhood is a stable confederation of children who share common interests and explicit norms that dictate how members should behave (Durkin, 1997). Members of peer groups in middle childhood share norms that they have created themselves. Because children in this age group develop such a strong sense of commitment and loyalty to the norms of their peer group, they are increasingly sensitive to the thoughts, opinions, judgments and evaluations of other children, and become very sensitive to what’s “cool” and what’s “in.” They therefore become alert to how to behave in public and how to avoid being ridiculed with respect to what they wear, or prefer to watch on television. For example, older children feel the need to firmly demonstrate their aversion to programs designed for younger children or for shows that feature characters younger than they are (Mielke, 1983). Although some of them might still like to watch programs made for younger children when they are alone, they “wouldn’t be caught dead” wearing a Sesame Street sweatshirt to school (Acuff, 1997).

Conversely, in some older peer groups it appears to be fashionable to watch entertainment programs made for preschoolers. For example, in Europe it has become a rage among peer groups in middle childhood and adolescence to watch Teletubbies, and even in some adult subcultures the program is acclaimed (Brunton, 1997). This striking phenomenon shows how easily and dramatically a child’s individual taste for entertainment can be overruled by the norms of the peer group to which he or she belongs.
Peer pressure seems to be an especially strong force in children’s exposure to frightening programs and movies. Although many children are attracted to something that produces a “good scare” that is not overwhelming, others, especially boys, often go along with their friends’ preferences, even though they suffer nightmares afterward. These children often admit they watched something scary because they did not want to be considered immature or unmanly, or, in their words, a “wimp” or a “wussy” (Cantor, 1998b).

**Gender Differences and Children’s Likes and Dislikes**

Despite the fact that being a girl in the 1990s is very different from being a girl a generation ago, important and meaningful differences have been noted between the way boys and girls typically think, how they express themselves, and what they value (Guber & Berry, 1993). Many researchers have observed that in the first two years, there does not appear to be any significant gender difference in play style and toy preference (Fagot, 1994). Boys can enjoy make-believe cooking and girls can enjoy pounding on a toy workbench (Guber & Berry, 1993). Boys and girls in this age group also do not seem to differ in their liking for TV characters, such as Barney and Big Bird, and the Teletubbies (Acuff, 1997), and in their liking of computer games designed for preschoolers (Sanger, Willson, Davies, & Whittaker, 1997). Significant gender differences in toy preference have been observed as early as two years, however (Goldstein, 1998). And by the time they are three, boys and girls frequently participate in different activities, avoid toys that are perceived to belong to the opposite sex, and play primarily in same-sex groups (Huston, 1983). This so-called process of gender segregation is found in a variety of cultures and settings (Leaper, 1994; Maccoby, 1994). As each gender group maintains different norms for social interaction, segregated peer groups become powerful socialization agents (Maccoby, 1990).

A factor that is believed to contribute to the emergence of gender segregation is behavioral compatibility, that is, the idea that at the ages of 2 and 3, boys and girls start to develop distinct interests and preferences, and that these interests and preferences are often not shared by opposite-sex peers (Martin, 1994). For example, it has repeatedly been found that boys engage in more
physically aggressive forms of play, such as pretend fights and conquests, and sports such as football (Goldstein, 1998). Girls’ play, on the other hand, often involves fine motor skills (James & McCain, 1982), such as dressing dolls, making jewelry, and other crafts. The emerging differences between boys and girls are clearly reflected in their preferences for entertainment. In comparison to preschool girls, preschool boys have a strong preference for action and violence in books and entertainment programs (Cantor & Nathanson, 1997; Jaglom & Gardner, 1981; Rosengren & Windahl, 1989). They tend to prefer themes and content in entertainment such as sports, violent fantasy themes, and more dangerous scenarios, involving, for example, dinosaurs and aliens. They also are attracted to heroic male characters, including superhumans (e.g., the Power Rangers, Hercules), sports stars, knights, soldiers, doctors, and policemen (Acuff, 1997). Preschool girls are more interested in relationship-centered and nurturing themes. They prefer themes and contexts such as castles, dance studios, school, the circus, and farmyards (Acuff, 1997). Whereas boys focus mainly on male characters, girls become attached to characters of both sexes (Hoffner, 1996; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). One explanation that has been advanced is that there are more male characters and that they generally have more exciting, interesting roles. Preschool girls generally focus on characters such as fashion models, ballerinas, dancers, good fairies, queens and princesses (Acuff, 1997).

Children’s awareness of societal stereotypes for gender roles continues to increase with age into adolescence, and in spite of the fact that cognitive flexibility increases in middle childhood and adolescence, boys’ and girls’ preferences diverge over time (Huston, 1983). Because children become increasingly involved with peers (Durkin, 1997), there is greater pressure to conform to gender-appropriate behavior (Matteson, 1975). It is not surprising, therefore, that differences in taste between boys and girls become stronger with age (Himmelweit et al., 1958).

Elementary school boys (Cantor & Nathanson, 1997; Valkenburg & Janssen, 1999) and adolescent males (Himmelweit et al., 1958) still have a comparatively strong preference for
action-oriented and violent programs. They become strongly attached to male action heroes and power figures, although the heroes are now more realistic (e.g., Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis). Watching adult television programs can also be considered daring and grown-up among boys (Rosengren & Windahl, 1998). Elementary school girls are in general more likely to react negatively to program scenarios involving action, violence, horror, and swearing (Valkenburg & Janssen, 1999), possibly because girls report more often being frightened by violent media depictions than boys do (e.g., LaFrance, & Banaji, 1992). In a study which had children list characteristics of an entertainment program that they would produce if they were an assistant producer, only girls, but no boys, spontaneously referred to the absence of sex, violence or coarse language in such a program (Valkenburg & Janssen, 1999).

What do girls like? Unfortunately, research on the program preferences of children has focused on gender differences mainly in the appeal of violent content (Cantor & Nathanson, 1997) and has largely ignored many other characteristics in entertainment programs that might be differentially preferred by male and female children. However, research on girls’ preferences for computer games suggests that girls are less object-oriented than males (Acuff, 1997). They are less interested than boys in devices, such as lasers, buttons, and futuristic weapons. For girls, it’s not so much about winning or killing the enemy (Berselli, 1998); girls like a story line (Sanger et al., 1997); they like real-life situations; and they are interested in the development of relationships between characters (Maccoby, 1994). Elementary school girls also have a preference for family situations, and they enjoy serial dramas with realistic themes (Palmer, 1986). They are most interested in realistic, attractive characters, like actresses, movie stars, male and female sports and music celebrities, and models (Acuff, 1997).

Finally, research has found that girls attach more value than boys to the comprehensibility of an entertainment program (Valkenburg & Janssen, 1999). This could be because girls are more interested than boys in dramatic story lines. In comparison to teenage males, teenage females are more eager to look for actors or actresses they recognize, invest more time in searching for
information about shows and characters, and prefer to watch an entertainment show from start to finish (Heeter, 1988).

The scarce research on gender-based preferences for romance in entertainment programs has yielded mixed results. Some studies suggest that girls like romantic themes in story books (Collins-Standley et al., 1996) and television shows (Himmelweit et al., 1958), more than boys do, whereas other studies have not found any significant gender differences in preferences for romance in television entertainment (Valkenburg & Janssen, 1999). Still others have suggested boys are more interested in such themes (Sheldon, Ramsay, & Loncar, 1994). One explanation for the divergent results may be the way romance has been operationalized in the various studies. Girls might be likely to favor romantic themes if the focus is on love and relationships; boys may prefer romance if the taboo nature of sexual activity is the focus. Further research should investigate in a more refined way how boys and girls in different age groups differ in their preference for various aspects of love and romance in entertainment shows.

The Special Case of Attraction to Scary Images and Themes

One important area of children’s attraction to entertainment that does not fit neatly into the age or gender analysis is the paradox of attraction to scary programs. What is perplexing about this area is that children are often drawn to scary television programs and movies even though they may suffer nightmares and severe anxieties afterwards (Cantor, 1998b). One set of reasons for children’s exposure has been alluded to already. These deal with social-group membership and the desire to be accepted by one’s peers. Many children watch scary entertainment so as not to be ridiculed by their friends, who may consider the ability to withstand frightening fare a test of maturity or perhaps manhood.” Relatedly, children may watch scary shows and movies together for the bonding experience” that often occurs when friends undergo an intense negative experience together.

Still, there are psychological reasons for children’s enjoyment of scary programs, that are not dependent on peer pressure or group interactions. There is something arresting or compelling
about witnessing dangerous events. Morbid curiosity is one explanation that is frequently advanced for children’s exposure to depictions of danger, mayhem, and death. From an evolutionary perspective, natural selection might make us innately predisposed to pay attention when violence, injury, disease, and death are occurring. Whether we enjoy that exposure is another issue, but it stands to reason that our curiosity is raised when we witness an accident or hear about a violent crime or life-threatening natural disaster. This curiosity is not just about real events that actually happened; it also extends to dramatic depictions of such events.

But another important aspect of the attraction of scary programs and movies for children seems to come from the fact that they are usually action-packed. It has been argued, for example, that action is a more important component of what attracts children to violent programming than the threatening or injurious behavior itself (Potts, Huston, & Wright, 1986). Certainly, we don’t see children flocking to programs about elderly people passing away quietly or disease victims in the final stages of their illness. Such stories can’t hold a candle to those involving shoot-em-ups, dinosaur attacks, and hand-to-hand combat in terms of appeal.

The arousing nature of scary programs seems to be an important component of children’s attraction to it. As Zillmann and Bryant (1994) have argued, viewers often use entertainment for mood management, to calm them when they are overstressed and stimulate them when they are bored. Children should be a particularly good audience for arousing materials because they have been observed to be relatively high in the sensation-seeking motive (Zuckerman, 1979). Moreover, sensation-seeking is positively associated with attraction to horror films among adolescents (e.g., Tamborini & Stiff, 1987).

Another reason that is often advanced for children’s attraction to frightening programming is that it helps children confront their fears and learn to control them. Many children report that they enjoy the feeling of power they get when the good guy, or the character they empathize with, overcomes dangers and triumphs over the forces of evil. There is some research that suggests that the right kind of scary program can help reduce viewers’ feelings of anxiety. In a study by
Bryant, Carveth, and Brown (1981), for example, college students who took a six-weeks’ heavy
dose of action adventure programs featuring good triumphing over evil showed reductions in their
feelings of anxiety and an increase in their interest in seeing more of such programs. Other
students, who were exposed to violence without justice restoration, did not show these effects. In
a more recent survey of parents (Cantor & Nathanson, 1997), children who had been frightened
by something on television were said to be more interested than others in violent television
programs in which good triumphs over evil, but not particularly interested in other types of violent
programs.

Many programs designed for children incorporate the theme of anxiety reduction into their
content on a regular basis. The most obvious and long-running example is a program that began
in the late sixties with the title of *Scooby Doo, Where Are You?* This animated program features
teenagers who solve mysteries involving monsters, ghosts, mummies, and the like. The central
characters always show extreme fear, but then help solve the mystery and show that things are
never quite as scary as they seem. *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood* frequently deals with children’s
fears, with episodes ranging from anxiety about going down the bathtub drain, to fear of the
Incredible Hulk. Finally, the current sensation, *Teletubbies*, features a vacuum cleaner as a pet.
Research has shown that fear of vacuum cleaners is one of the most common fears of young
preschoolers (Fraiberg, 1966). The casting of this common household appliance in a friendly,
nonthreatening role may have been designed to help children overcome their fear of vacuum
cleaners.

There is some evidence, then, that children may expose themselves to scary programs in
which a threatening agent is overcome because they find such stories reassuring. It is important to
note, however, that not all stories end happily, and many that do show the triumph of good over
evil will not necessarily be reassuring. Often, a drama ends happily by luck and the threatened
protagonists are saved just in the nick of time. Also, much more story time is typically spent on
the dramatization of danger than on the protective or retaliatory measures that produce the reassuring outcome.

Although some children are attracted to scary themes, others are not. Boys, for example, say they like horror more than girls do, and they are less likely to report long-term emotional reactions as a result of exposure (e.g., Harrison & Cantor, 1999). There is also evidence that children who are more violent are more attracted to violent, scary themes (e.g., Atkin, Greenberg, Korzenny, & McDermott, 1979). In addition, exposure to real-life violence has been shown to be positively correlated with interest in violent programs. A study in inner-city Milwaukee (Bruce, 1995), for example, showed that children who had been exposed to high levels of community violence were more interested than their peers in violent programming. Interestingly, the more these adolescents liked to view violence, the less interested they were in seeing justice restored. These kids were apparently interested in violence for violence’s sake and were not viewing these programs in search of anxiety reduction. In contrast, other adolescents in the same sample were not attracted to these programs. Those respondents who were experiencing acute anxiety symptoms from the violence in their environment were the least interested in viewing violent shows and the most upset when they did view them. Acute anxiety symptoms were also positively associated with saying that viewing violent television programming made them think about things in their own lives.

These data show that there are important individual differences in children’s preferences for certain types of entertainment and that exposure to scary themes may serve various functions for different children.

Concluding Comment

A basic assumption in modern theories of media effects is that children are active and motivated explorers of what they see on television. The research reviewed in this chapter suggests that even very young children are able to actively screen television content for attractiveness and understandability, and make an effort to interpret it in their own terms (Collins, 1981; Valkenburg
& van der Voort, 1994). It also suggests that boys and girls in various age groups have very specific preferences for different types of entertainment, which confirms the assumption that gender and cognitive developmental level are important determinants of children’s likes and dislikes of entertainment programs.

Another fundamental assumption of current media theories is that any effect of television entertainment on children is enhanced, channeled or mitigated by what the child viewer makes of it (Clifford et al., 1995; Valkenburg & Janssen, 1999). So in order to understand television’s effects on children, it is important to gain insights into the different motivations for children’s selective exposure to entertainment. There is a need for further research, especially more controlled studies in which various aspects of programs are systematically manipulated, in order to understand more fully the elements of programs that attract children, and the functions that different types of content serve in children’s lives.

References


