

FT Magazine Television

How much TV should your children be watching right now?

Some shows are good; others, less so. What's important during lockdown is knowing the difference

Henry Mance 11 HOURS AGO

In the early 1980s, [Silvio Berlusconi](#) was starting to take hold of Italian television. His bombastic Mediaset channels were on air for more hours each day than the public broadcaster RAI.

They had virtually none of RAI's educational programmes or news bulletins. Instead, they specialised in quiz shows, soap operas and imported cartoons, while exceeding the legal limits for advertising slots.

But Mediaset's transmitters covered only about half of Italy's population. So three decades later, a [team of academics](#) could track how Berlusconi's channels had shaped a generation of Italians.

They found that boys from areas with Mediaset coverage were more likely to be exempted from national service later in life because they performed poorly on the military's psychometric tests.

Adult numeracy and literacy tests also revealed that Italians with access to Mediaset before they turned 10 had worse cognitive skills than those who did not — by the equivalent of about three to four IQ points.



Mediaset (then RTI) founder Silvio Berlusconi in 1986. 'Pretty much anything you could do would have been better than watching Berlusconi's TV,' says academic Ruben Durante © Getty

Cross-checking with political survey data, the academics found that these Italians would also disproportionately support populist parties in the future — first, Berlusconi's own Forza Italia, then the [Five Star movement](#).

“TV doesn’t brainwash you,” says Ruben **Durante**, a professor at Barcelona’s Pompeu Fabra University and one of the study’s three authors, all of whom grew up in areas with Mediaset (then known as RTI) channels in the early 1980s.

“There’s nothing inherently bad about TV. What’s important is what the content is and what activities it’s crowding out. Pretty much anything you could do would have been better than watching Berlusconi’s TV.”

Almost every parent knows the sweet release that comes with turning on the TV. By occupying the children, the television brings the freedom to cook dinner, send an email or just relax.

TV or not TV?

Has your children’s screen time increased under lockdown? How much do you control what they watch? How do you feel about what they watch? Share your thoughts in the comments below

Right now it is allowing millions of parents around the world to keep working and stay sane. In the week after the UK’s schools were shut last month due to coronavirus, viewing of children’s programmes on the BBC’s iPlayer rose 80 per cent.

At the same time, it is often a guilty habit. Many parents wonder if it will erode their children’s brains. They silently wish the kids were reading books or running around in the garden instead. The apparent impact of Berlusconi’s channels is a cautionary tale.

This dilemma had intensified even before the pandemic hit, because controlling what children watch — and for how long — is trickier than ever. There is the explosion in devices. There is also the fragmentation in broadcasting. British children aged five to seven say their [favourite streaming apps](#) are YouTube, YouTube Kids, Netflix and DisneyLife — ahead of the iPlayer.

“Watching TV” can mean anything from the most expensive Pixar film to the cheapest home video. For most parents, the remote control has become a double-edged sword.

Parents have traditionally tried to tame TV through time limits. The American Academy of Pediatrics [recommends a maximum](#) of one hour a day of electronic screens for kids aged between two and five.

Even before the coronavirus shutdown, this was not widely observed: for New York three-year-olds, the median screen time is [two hours a day](#); British children aged four to six watch a daily average of 89 minutes of linear television, without including other content.



Janey-Cait watching 'Peppa Pig'. The broadcast rights to the show, which is available in more than 180 territories, generated £90m in the year ending March 2019 © Robbie Cooper

The good news for stressed parents is that screen time alone may not be the key. Decades of research — featuring shows such as *Sesame Street* and *SpongeBob SquarePants* — point to a broader approach. “What children watch may be more important than how much they watch,” [Kasia Kostyrka-Allchorne](#), a psychologist at King’s College London, has written.

“The measure that people could point to was time,” says Shelley Pasnik, director of the New York-based Center for Children & Technology. “We’ve lingered on that for too long. That has come at the expense of other measures.”

In one study in Massachusetts and Kansas, five-year-olds who watched more informative TV programmes (mainly made by the American public broadcaster PBS) were more likely to read books as teens; the boys also received higher grades in high school.

This has significant implications. If quality is what matters, then the BBC and PBS may be more important than politicians have appreciated; their contribution may not be easily substituted by streaming services. Sir David Clementi, the BBC's chairman, has [warned](#) that, if the British government changed the broadcaster's funding to a voluntary subscription, it is "very unlikely to continue the level of properly curated programmes for children".

A focus on the quality of what children watch puts a burden on parents: first, to select good programmes and, second, to help their kids draw value from them. Choosing wisely is not easy: videos that are marketed as educational are often not.

In 2009, Disney [offered a refund](#) to purchasers of its *Baby Einstein* DVDs after studies found that exposing very young children to video content could actually retard their language learning.



'Sesame Street' PBS, 1969-present © Alamy



'JoJo & Gran Gran' BBC, 2020 © BBC

Adults have strong feelings about children's TV. One of my colleagues argues that [Hey Duggee](#), a BBC cartoon about a large brown dog, is a “masterpiece” — pointing out that one episode was inspired by *Apocalypse Now*. (“Everyone should watch it.”) Another thinks that [Octonauts](#), a BBC cartoon about the ocean, “tells you a lot more than those ponderous David Attenborough shows”.

The classic example of high-quality programming is [Sesame Street](#), which was produced together with educational specialists. “They have a lot of repetition and a lot of clear labelling of numbers and objects,” says Tim Smith, a cognitive psychologist at Birkbeck, University of London. “Often when parents are watching, it seems quite tedious or bizarre. But all those things are informed by what we know about the developing mind.”

Other shows that appear gibberish to adults — including the BBC's *Teletubbies* and *In the Night Garden* — are similarly built on educationalists' insights into what a particular age group can handle.

The creation of *Bing*, the story of a three-year-old, rabbit-shaped toddler, involved 23 external writers, two Montessori teachers, four educational advisers and a speech and language therapist.

“It was harrowing. It was lots of talented people slamming doors and disagreeing,” says Mikael Shields, chief executive of Acamar Films, which developed *Bing* — originally a book series — into a TV show for CBeebies. “People don’t realise that children are elite consumers of stories. There are no couch potato three-years-olds: if they’re not engaged, they’re physically off.”

Bing is designed to bring patient, liberal Montessori parenting, in watered-down form, to millions of children. “Every single day we have half a dozen messages saying, ‘My little one is scared of the dark, or keeps waking up, or won’t eat their food or is selectively mute, and *Bing* helps because . . .’” says Shields.



‘Bing’, Acamar Films, 2014-present © Acamar Films



‘Cosmic Kids Yoga’, YouTube, 2012-present © YouTube

Bing and *Peppa Pig* are aimed at preschoolers — the narrow age group for whom television appears most useful. Babies younger than two or even three struggle to understand TV and appear prone to attention problems if they watch too much; screen use also disrupts their sleep. Schoolchildren have less time to watch (pandemics aside), and TV's ability to relay the complex ideas they need is less clear.

Bing and *Peppa Pig* may not seem comparable to *Sesame Street*. But experts say that they fulfil a developmental role. “When parents are thinking about content being educational, it doesn't just have to remind them of being in school. They have to think: what experiences has my child had and which experiences are they going to have soon?” says Birkbeck's Smith.

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dynamics and the story structure”.

Simplicity is key. “*Peppa* is very simplistically animated, as if it were drawn by a child themselves,” says Smith. “All of the animations — the house, the car — are consistent across every episode, as are what each of the characters wears and what sounds they make. Suzy Sheep baas every time she appears.” Because kids quickly understand the set-up, “they can be guided through the social

Of course, adults can rapidly develop aversions to their children's preferences. One of my colleagues thinks *Peppa* is “too bossy”; another hates *Bing*'s “egregious whiny voice”,

“deliberate mispronunciation” and the fact that he bears “no biological similarity” to his carer.

The top children’s shows are expensive and focus-grouped. Each seven-minute episode of *Bing* now costs about £350,000 — as much per minute as some blockbuster dramas. They can recoup this by going global, partly because cultural differences are less developed in young children. The broadcast rights to *Peppa Pig*, which is now available in more than 180 territories, generated £90m in the year ending March 2019.

Quality children’s TV mixes entertainment and education. “It’s covert ops: you slip the nourishment in there,” says Jackie Edwards, a former BBC executive who now directs a UK government fund for children’s television. “There was a time when you’d be [either] entertaining *or* didactic in children’s programmes. But that was a long, long time ago.”

In the UK, the BBC has a legal responsibility to make at least 100 hours of new British programmes a year for preschoolers and 400 hours for preteens. Other public service broadcasters, such as ITV and Channel 4, have scaled back their children’s programming, partly because of tighter rules on what adverts can be shown to kids. The £57m Young Audiences Content Fund, which Edwards runs, is intended to address that.



'Octonauts', BBC, 2010-present © BBC



'SpongeBob SquarePants', Nickelodeon, 1999-present © Alamy

The BBC and PBS are still widely seen as the gold standard. Public broadcasters are less inclined to judge shows on the basis of how many toys they will sell. For producers, turning TV into toys is a key source of profits: Entertainment One, the owner of *Peppa Pig* and *PJ Masks*, was even acquired by the toymaker Hasbro last year for £2.9bn. “I think children’s producers want to do well by kids, and they work for companies that want to do right by shareholders,” says Pasnik, of the Center for Children & Technology.

But public service is not the only game in town. Netflix has its own take on stealth learning. Its children’s offerings include [StoryBots](#), originally a YouTube channel, whose characters answer various queries — such as how do people [catch a cold](#).

“We’ve chosen to go for learning through laughter,” says Dominique Bazay, who runs Netflix’s original animation outside the US. Bazay describes Netflix as a “companion to the BBC”, suggesting it does not seek to replicate the latter’s curriculum-based shows.

StoryBots shows how high-quality programmes can now be found on every platform. [Cosmic Kids Yoga](#), which guides children through yoga moves while telling them a

story, was started by actor Jaime Amor on YouTube in 2012 and is now also available on Amazon Prime.

But what happens when adults and kids diverge in their judgments of what makes quality TV? Sometimes it's the grown-ups who object. *Peppa Pig*'s storylines often seem to involve buying something; its gender roles are cloyingly traditional. A large number of cartoon characters are male, including six of the eight *Octonauts*, three of the four *Go Jetters* and two of the three *PJ Masks*.

“You have a daughter — you notice it. I notice my daughter uses the ‘he’ pronoun all the time. It must be going in somehow,” says Elly Rothnie, a fundraiser for London’s Hackney Empire theatre, who has a three-year-old.

£350k

The cost of each seven-minute episode of ‘Bing’ — as much per minute as some blockbuster dramas

thin, beautiful princesses.

Disney films continue to divide the world into princesses and princes. Its 1989 film *The Little Mermaid* is almost unwatchable now: it features a sexualised 16-year-old protagonist. *Frozen*, Disney’s current all-conquering franchise, is better, but it still centres around

What younger children probably take away from these films are not high-minded messages of female empowerment, but a desire to look like Elsa and Anna.

Beyond this, adults may not be a great judge of what stimulates children. We are biased towards programmes that evoke our own childhood.

The makers of *Sarah & Duck*, a whimsical CBeebies cartoon, were consciously inspired by gentle shows such as *Bagpuss*, which they grew up on; one parent of a similar age said the show was “possibly the modern-day *Magic Roundabout*”. We want our kids to enjoy the classic films and shows that we did, but tastes may have evolved.

Is there such a thing as objectively bad kids’ TV? By common consensus, violence is bad. In the Massachusetts and Kansas study, preschoolers who watched more violent shows were less likely to be involved in leadership positions in high school; the girls, but not the boys, had significantly worse grades.

Age-inappropriate TV is also bad. Young children cannot engage with adult shows, and viewing them displaces other activities that may have more benefit.

Many parents have a different conception of bad children’s TV — loud, brash, thoughtless. In one experiment, psychologists at the University of Virginia showed a group of four-year-olds nine minutes of the Nickelodeon cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants*, and another group nine minutes of a PBS cartoon called *Caillou*.



‘Peppa Pig’, Entertainment One, 2004-present © Alamy



‘In the Night Garden’ BBC, 2007-09 © DHX Worldwide

Afterwards they asked the children to undergo a series of exercises — such as touching their toes when they were told to touch their heads. Those who had watched *SpongeBob* performed significantly worse. (They also performed worse than a third group, who spent nine minutes drawing.)

The researchers, Angeline Lillard and Jennifer Peterson, speculated that the children had been affected by *SpongeBob*'s “[onslaught of fantastical events](#)”, which they could not understand. Yet it's unclear what elements truly impaired the children's cognitive abilities, and whether these are present in other shows.

Likewise, we don't know why Berlusconi's channels might have affected Italian children in the 1980s. Was it the lack of educational content, the quantity of advertising or something else?

The Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon are known for noisy, fast-paced programmes. Anecdotally, many parents see their kids' behaviour decline after such shows. One parent told me of a “definite pattern of watching half an episode of *Paw Patrol* and then going feral”. (*Paw Patrol* actually originated in a Canadian public broadcaster.)

But children's tastes are hard to control. Rothnie's daughter comes back from nursery saying she loves *Peppa Pig*, even though she has never seen it at home. “I'm having to say we don't watch *Peppa Pig*, but I know that won't last,” says Rothnie.

Today the bane of many parents is YouTube. On the YouTube Kids app, you can find almost everything — from gentle BBC programmes such as *Sarah & Duck* to fast-paced

shows that resemble *SpongeBob SquarePants*, or YouTubers that, to many adults, resemble hell on earth.

There seems to be little educational value in Ryan's World (24.5 million subscribers), featuring an eight-year-old unwrapping presents, or DanTDM (22.6 million subscribers), who uploads videos of himself playing *Minecraft*, or Coyote Peterson (15.7 million subscribers), who specialises in being bitten by insects and reptiles.



Lola watching Disney's 'Robin Hood'. Right now, TV is allowing millions of parents around the world to keep working and stay sane © Robbie Cooper

YouTube Kids limits adverts; many YouTubers instead rely on money from merchandise and product placement, which may not be clearly identifiable to children.

User-generated content is not rejected out of hand by educationalists. “The idea of having your experience reflected starts very early — babies want to watch other babies,” says Pasnik.

Experts underline that children, like adults, should be allowed to have fun when watching TV. YouTube may be particularly strong in developing kids’ social skills. But part of the problem is context. Whereas traditional TV channels endeavour to serve children a balanced diet of genres, streaming platforms’ recommendation engines work differently. They may drive children down rabbit holes.

All streaming services, including the BBC’s iPlayer, facilitate binge-watching. But YouTube Kids seems particularly geared to it. The first *Peppa Pig* video I found was more than an hour long; there was a *Bing* compilation lasting 38 minutes. Older children can quickly disappear into a vortex of sameness.

30%

Children from working-class homes watch almost a third more TV than those from middle-class homes

very inappropriate.

“The public service is to broaden your perspective,” says Jackie Edwards. “You need to show them all the world.” YouTube itself (as opposed to the Kids app) also has another risk: you are potentially never more than a few clicks away from something very different and

Public-service broadcasters also try to reflect society. The BBC offers Britishness — at least 70 per cent of its shows are UK-made — whereas Netflix, Amazon and YouTube offer mainly US content.

Greg Childs, director of the Children’s Media Foundation, an advocacy group, is adamant: “It’s important for kids to hear their voice, experience their own stories, and see the end of their own road.”

BBC commissioning guidelines specifically ask for shows that, for example, address climate change, appeal to different social groups or use British Sign Language. As the father of one boy with Down’s syndrome put it to me: “My son sees kids on there who look like him, which is pretty cool.”



‘StoryBots’, Netflix, 2016-present © Netflix



‘Hey Duggee’, BBC, 2014-present © BBC

It’s not just what you watch, it’s how you watch it. Parents often want the TV to act as a babysitter; producers and broadcasters insist that’s not what it’s for. “That’s a huge part of our strategy: we really want parents to be present in the room when kids are watching,” says Netflix’s Bazay.

“If little ones find something funny, and they’re watching with somebody else, they turn round to whoever they’re with,” says Shields, the producer of *Bing*. “The enjoyment is

social.”

Children will not absorb the full benefit from educational shows if they are simply left to binge-watch. “They haven’t taken the information into long-term memory and personalised it. It’s just gone,” says Birkbeck’s Smith.

“The best thing to do is to pause between shows and if there’s something you think you can engage in, talk to the child about it, and even try to make a game about it. If Peppa was trying to build a fort out of cardboard boxes, say to the child, ‘Would you like to build a fort?’ All of a sudden, you’ve brought it into their real world.”

Initially, I thought such recommendations were naive. If parents had the energy and the time to watch TV shows with their children, and to plan activities around them, then why would they bother with TV at all? But when I tried spinning off games from *Sarah & Duck* and *Bing*, I was surprised. My daughters took to them with delight. TV had previously babysat my kids for, say, half an hour. Now it was a source of activities that could take place when the screen was turned off.

“Any media can be a springboard for conversation, although there are better hooks in well-produced media,” says Pasnik. “That places greater responsibility on the adult.”

The promise of technology is to act as a leveller. In theory, TVs and other electronic screens can overcome inequalities in geography, wealth and schooling. They can bring the best content to every household. The reality has always been different. TVs were initially limited to wealthier families. Today nearly every household has one, but quality programmes — and quality viewing experiences — are still distributed unequally.

Young and lower-IQ children may have more at stake: some of the [negative educational effects](#) of TV viewing seem less pronounced among high-IQ and older children, while those from lower social groups are more exposed. In the UK, children from C2DE — or working-class — homes watch 30 per cent more television than those from ABC1 — or middle-class — homes, according to the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board. CBeebies reaches a similar proportion of both groups, but the BBC is more popular with ABC1s from school age.



'Sarah & Duck', BBC and Karrot Entertainment, 2013-17 © Karrot Entertainment



'Teletubbies', BBC, 1997-2001, revived 2015-present © Alamy

“For children from relatively well-off, well-educated families with lots of resources, this period of home schooling [during the pandemic] is probably going to be tricky, but will be OK,” says Lucy Maddox, a clinical psychologist and author of the book, *Blueprint: How Our Childhood Makes Us Who We Are*. “For children from homes where parents don’t have the time or resources to be helping children to learn, it will be harder.”

Children’s TV epitomises the changes in the media industry. The traditional players, the BBC and PBS, remain the most consistent guide of quality. They can relieve parents of

some of the burden of curating everything their children watch.

But they no longer have a monopoly on quality, nor do they have the stickiest technology. Their grasp on audiences is slipping. Only one-third of Brits aged four to six watch at least 15 minutes of CBeebies on a TV set every week. CBBC, the channel aimed at six- to 12-year-olds, reached only 17 per cent of them on the TV, and 12 per cent via iPlayer.

There's nothing inherently bad about TV. What's important is what the content is and what activities it's crowding out

Academic Ruben Durante

In the US, PBS reaches more than any children's cable network, but one in three children aged two to eight doesn't watch any PBS in a year.

Before coronavirus hit, the BBC was preparing for a sustained fight with the Conservative government over the compulsory licence fee, which provides £3.7bn in funding each year. BBC News had announced 450 job losses.

Since the shutdown, the [BBC has paused cuts](#), announced a slate of educational programming and launched a children's version of its iPlayer app. This is an opportunity to prove its worth to sceptical politicians.

Children's TV takes up only about 5 per cent of the BBC's total licence fee spending on TV, and winning young viewers is key to the broadcaster's medium-term future. "The advocates of children's TV inside the BBC assure us that it will be one of the last to go,"

says Greg Childs of The Children's Media Foundation. "But what does that mean if the BBC's funding is decimated?"

If the BBC is forced down the subscription route that some have pushed for, the most likely subscribers would be those from wealthier, more highly educated groups, who are already more likely to use the service.

This could create two tiers of children — those with access to the most trustworthy children's brand, and those who would watch more TV but have a worse mix of programming. At some point in the future, social scientists would surely publish a startling study of how TV had shaped the two groups of children.

For the moment, parents have the more immediate concern of surviving the shutdown. "Parents relieved as *Peppa Pig* release six-week-long episode," ran one spoof headline in the Daily Mash at the start of last year's summer holidays. The joke is now very close to the bone.

"When life goes back to normal, I don't think it will have stunted her development," says Rothnie, of the increased screen time her three-year-old daughter is currently enjoying. "I don't think this is personal improvement time — it's getting-through time."

Henry Mance is the FT's chief features writer

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