

The things YOU can learn from kids' TV

by David Kushner

Photographs by William Duke

Like a lot of dads, I often feel like Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*, living the same events over and over again. The moment I finish one thing, my girls hit replay. Just finished reading Dr. Seuss' *The Foot Book*? "Again, again," they cry. Twiddled them around like airplanes? "Again, again!" Treated them to a spontaneously goofy break-dance routine? "Again, again, again, again."

But four furry freaks with plasma-screen stomachs helped me see the light. "Again, again" isn't just the mantra of the *Teletubbies*; of course, it's their *modus operandi*. On the television program, they might show a two-minute clip of bunnies bopping through a field, only to repeat the same exact loop after the voices of kids off-screen plead for another run.

Such tactics are a big reason that *Teletubbies* and other children's television shows are so addictive—for better or worse. The producers know how to reach kids. In the *Teletubbies* case, they know one of the golden lessons of child development: Toddlers love and thrive on repetition. >>

Learn from kids' TV

Why? Because it reinforces their processing of new information. When my toddlers were saying "again, again," it wasn't a ploy to exhaust me, it was a means to help them better understand the world around them—and have fun.

Your kids aren't the only ones who can learn from children's television: you can, too, even if, like in our house, you try to keep tube time to a minimum. A few things the creators of kids' shows know that moms and dads would benefit from:

Slower is usually better

I'm not the only one who's learned the power of patience from watching kids' TV. When Andrea Gamson, a mom in Atlanta, needs to coax her 3-year-old, Will, into finishing his carrots or give her 2-year-old daughter, Ella, another ride on piggyback, she catches a clue from *Blue's Clues* and backs off her pace a little. "Joe, and Steve before him, taught me the patience in getting down to your kid's level, physically and mentally," she says.

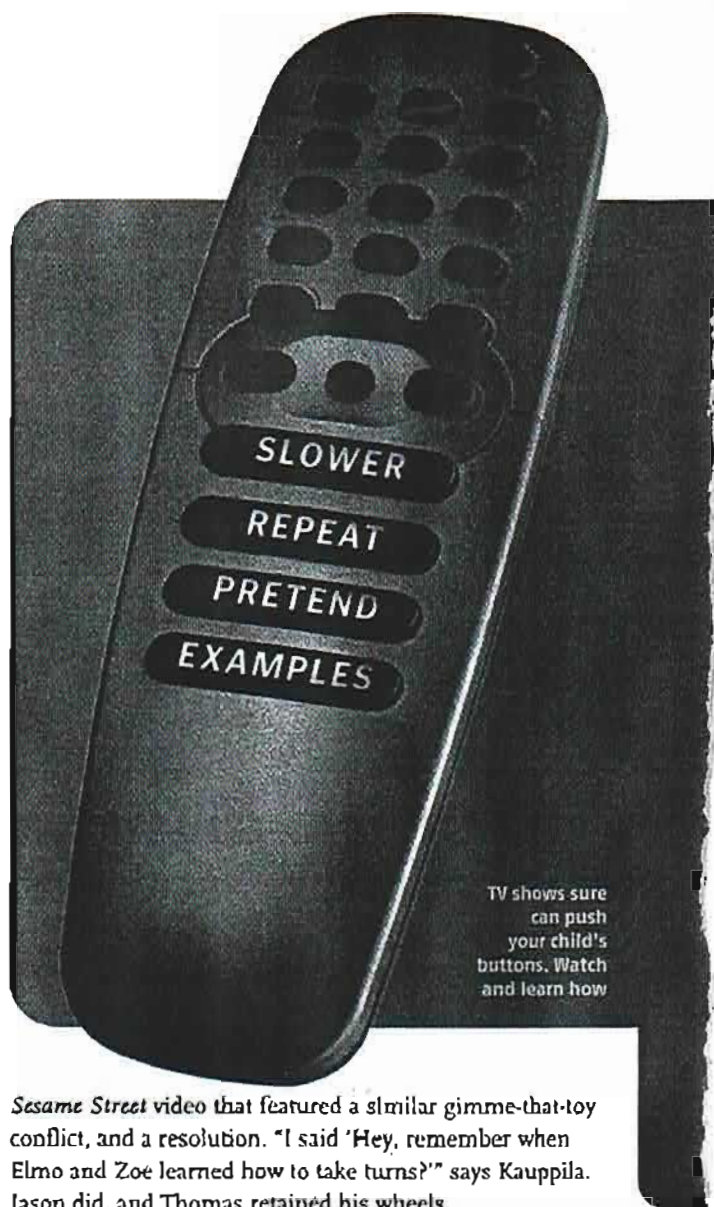
On *Blue's Clues*, for instance, Joe walks up close to the camera, stoops down, asks his question, and waits—sometimes interminably, it can seem to an adult—for a response. He's not doing this because he's run out of things to say. "The pauses came from studying lots of conversations we had with four-years-olds," says Angela Santomero, cocreator and executive director of *Blue's Clues*. "When we jumped in early, we cut them off. But if we waited long enough, they'd say something brilliant."

If you're looking to learn from the Yoda of 4-year-old communication, check out reruns of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. "If you look at the time Fred Rogers took taking off one garment and putting on his sweater, that pace is an excellent guide for parents to use to slow down their behavior," says Gordon Berry, professor emeritus in the graduate school of education and information studies at the University of California at Los Angeles, who also says he tries to emulate Rogers when interacting with his own grandkids.

There are various ways to put this no-rush method into play. Asking a preschooler about her day? Don't multitask. Stop folding the laundry, crouch down to her level, focus, and listen. Want to see how well your child grasps a bedtime story? Ask him to tell you what the story was about—then shut your trap. When in doubt, if you say less, he'll probably say more.

Examples work

Pamela Kauppila, a mom in New York City, needed all the help she could get one afternoon when her 4-year-old son, Jason, was battling with a friend who wanted him to share his coveted Thomas train. Then she remembered a recent



TV shows sure can push your child's buttons. Watch and learn how

Sesame Street video that featured a similar gimme-that-toy conflict, and a resolution. "I said 'Hey, remember when Elmo and Zoë learned how to take turns?'" says Kauppila. Jason did, and Thomas retained his wheels.

The lesson: When resolving a tough situation, try using examples from stuff your kid might have seen in a favorite show. "Story lines like that can give kids the language they need to help resolve disputes," says Anna Housley-Juster, assistant director of content for *Sesame Street*.

So keep a watchful eye on conflict resolution that occurs on shows, and save them for later use. Say something like "Remember that time Miffy kept searching for the carrot even when she couldn't find it?" Or "This is like that time that Little Bill hurt his arm and had to go to the hospital."

This works partly because children enter the pretend world of TV so completely. It's as though seeing something on television gives it a special legitimacy.

Kids' stuff is big stuff

One of the best things that kids' TV provides is the chance to crawl inside a child's head. "As a parent, you get great insight into the way kids might be thinking," says Housley-Juster. And when you're looking at the world from a child's

point of view, you realize that the things that seem small to you often look a lot bigger to them. And TV's sometimes seemingly goofy details are central to a child's life.

Consider the little hero of the show *Arthur*. Arthur often grapples with interpersonal-conflict issues particular to a kid—or aardvark—his age. Andrew Sarnow, a dad in Pennington, New Jersey, recalls watching one episode with his daughter, Ava, in which Arthur got upset that his younger sister was getting too much attention from their parents. Seeing his 2-year-old's rapt attention helped Sarnow appreciate her perspective on sibling rivalry and see what Ava could be experiencing now that he and his wife have a second child. "It made me think about giving children space as individuals, but balancing it with respecting the family's union," he says.

Watch how stressed Baby Bop on *Barney* gets when she misplaces her yellow blankie. "Even using a toothbrush is new for lots of two-year-olds," says Mary Ann Dudko, Ph.D., vice president of content development for HIT Entertainment, producers of shows that include *Barney*, *Oswald*, and *Bob the Builder*. "That's why we can base an entire episode on that one little thing."

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Kids aren't abstract

When you—or your kids—are feeling lost, you might take Dora's advice and yell, "Map!" The point: Kids understand concrete visual images far better than an abstract idea. That's essentially what good cartoons and cartoonlike kids' shows do—they communicate and explore complicated ideas in simple, graphic ways.

Chris Gifford, cocreator and executive producer of *Dora the Explorer*, recently tried this out with his own kids, Katie, 5, and Henry, 3. Overwhelmed and unenthused about an upcoming day of errands, Katie and Henry were whiny and volatile. So taking a cue from Dora, Gifford drew a map showing their various stops: from the supermarket to the cleaners and, finally, the playground. "On the most basic level, this enabled me to get them to do something I wanted. But their change in attitude also showed that they hadn't really understood what the day held to begin with."

This can work with lots of situations. Next time you're going off to work or dropping off a reluctant, clinging preschooler, sketch your journey out with a crayon or marker—you sitting in your car, standing in an elevator, sitting at a desk. Or when it's time to visit the dentist, draw it out ahead of time—playing in the waiting room, sitting in the dentist chair, the dentist polishing teeth, a smiling mouth (with gleaming chompers). Don't worry if your artistic skills aren't up to snuff. Children never seem to care about that kind of thing anyway.

The Land of Pretend is close by

In the Kaufmann household in Pittsburgh, you never know who might be stopping by for a visit. David and Dori Kaufmann routinely act like characters from their children's favorite shows in order to get things done. It wasn't their idea.

Charlotte, their 3-year-old, is so enamored of *Little Bear* that she frequently assigns roles to her mom and dad. It comes in handy, particularly at bedtime. "In *Little Bear*, Momma Bear ends every day by recalling that day's events with Little Bear," says Dori. "I do that now with Charlotte. It calms her down and makes her happier to go to bed."

Kids love to pretend. They know their family isn't a bunch of bears, but they like to make believe it is. And if it's bedtime in bear land, then bed it will be. Your child's play instinct is so strong that he may just forget to have a tantrum about leaving the house if suddenly he's Caillou telling Rosie that it's time to get her shoes on.

Being bossy rarely works

If there's one thing you can learn from kids' shows, it's how to communicate without being condescending or demanding. The *Wiggles* don't order children to jump up and down on one foot, they pose a question: "Can you jump up and down on one foot?" They challenge.

"Instead of answering your own question, even if you know the answer, it's great to get kids involved," says *Blue's Clues'* Santomero. So don't tell your toddler to put on her coat, say "Can you put on your coat by yourself?" Don't order your preschooler to brush her teeth after dinner—try offering a challenge instead: "Can you brush your teeth and rub your tummy at the same time?"

Just because you can learn something from children's television doesn't mean you should watch more of it. But you can make the most of your exposure. After communing with the *Telerubbies*, I'm now more patient when my kids want me to flip a pancake for the seventh time. Before they can ask, I'm doing it again. And again. ■

David Kushner has written for *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *Parade*, and *Wired*. He's a father of two.