

**Guidelines for the development of a series
of television programmes directed at
anti-sectarian work with children
in their early years**

by
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Introduction

- This report was commissioned by the Cultural Diversity Programme of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council with the aim of examining the feasibility of, and producing a set of guidelines for, the development of a series of stand-alone television programmes directed at anti-sectarian work with children in their early years.
- Given the sensitive nature of the topic, the report grounds these guidelines in a careful and comprehensive review of current research and practice. The first three chapters of the report examine existing research evidence in relation to: the nature of sectarianism and ethnic prejudice among young children; the abilities of young children to think rationally and morally and thus reflect upon their own attitudes and behaviour; and the factors affecting young children's comprehension of television programmes and the general effects of television on their behaviour.
- Chapter Four examines current practice in relation to existing guidelines for those wishing to do anti-sectarian work with young children. It also offers an assessment of what has already been produced in relation to television programmes aimed at addressing sectarian attitudes among children in Northern Ireland and those aimed at addressing racism and ethnic prejudice among young children more generally. The implications highlighted in relation to the analysis contained in each of these chapters then form the basis for the development of a detailed set of guidelines in Chapter Five.

1. Sectarianism, Prejudice and Young Children

- Research on children in Northern Ireland has shown that children as young as five or six are already developing an awareness of one or both of the two main categories Catholic and Protestant. However, this research has consistently shown that it is not until about the age of 10 or 11 that the majority of children are able to categorise on a denominational basis.
- These conclusions are a little premature however and may be more a result of the particular indirect and highly structured, experimental methodology employed by researchers rather than being an accurate reflection of the nature and extent of sectarianism among young children. There is, therefore, an urgent need for more qualitative and in-depth research on the nature, influence and effects of sectarianism among children and especially those in their early years.
- In the absence of such research, the implications of research on children and ethnic prejudice more generally have been carefully examined to assess what the likely nature and extent of sectarianism among young children in Northern Ireland would be. From this review, it seems reasonable to assume that children from the age of three onwards are capable of developing an awareness of one of both of the categories Protestant and Catholic and assigning negative traits to them. This then provides the basis from which these children develop, as they grow older, more elaborated and entrenched views about these two main ethno-religious categories.

- Part of an effective strategy for attempting to challenge these negative biases is to offer positive portrayals of Catholics and Protestants which would help to contradict and thus undermine them. This can be done by stressing the similarities common to members of both groups and positively portraying the differences that do exist and thus encouraging children to value and respect these.
- Such a strategy will be limited unless it is part of a wider programme of action. The development of more ‘flexible thinking’ in terms of encouraging positive portrayals of Protestant and Catholics as advocated above will not necessarily, in itself, reduce the social divides that exist. There is a need to recognise the central importance of the broader social and political contexts within which children are located and the inevitably pivotal influences these exert on their motivations to develop and maintain sectarian attitudes and behaviour. In short, changes in attitudes can only be effective alongside changes in the broader environments that give rise to such attitudes. However, as a small part of this overall change process, such television programmes can play an important role.

2. Prosocial Behaviour and Young Children

- Another significant part of the strategy aimed at challenging sectarianism among young children should be to encourage the development of those skills necessary to enable each child to re-assess and regulate their own attitudes and behaviour. More specifically, this requires encouraging the development of young children’s moral reasoning skills and their ability to empathise with others and thus to understand some of the more adverse emotional consequences of their sectarian behaviour.
- While traditional models of child development suggest that such behaviour is beyond the social and cognitive skills of young children, recent research has shown that these models tend to significantly underestimate their abilities. In relation to moral reasoning, for example, preschool children have been shown not only to regulate their own behaviour in relation to particular social conventions and moral rules but also to police that of others.
- For three and four year olds in particular, research has also shown that not only are they able to express a concern for and understanding of the physical, material and psychological needs of others, but they are also beginning to be able to verbalise and justify their actions. They are also receptive, at least in part, to developing an understanding of the gains of their prosocial behaviour. So long as television programmes keep their message relatively simple and uncomplicated, there is therefore plenty of scope for encouraging children to consider the adverse consequences of their sectarian behaviour on others and to empathise with, and see the benefits of, helping others.

- There are a number of ways in which prosocial behaviour can be directly encouraged among young children. These are :
 - ◆ helping children to label and empathise with the emotional states of others;
 - ◆ explaining the reasons why others feel emotional;
 - ◆ explaining and modelling appropriate responses to the needs of others;
 - ◆ teaching young children that they are competent to help others and also responsible to do so;
 - ◆ focusing on the positive effects of prosocial behaviour for the recipient;
 - ◆ reinforcing the prosocial behaviour of a child by attaching positive intentions to it.

3. Children and Television

- Research evidence suggests that the most important factor in attempting to gain and maintain the attention of young children is the degree to which the programme is comprehensible to them. A programme that is fast-paced, containing humour and plenty of action, and which is accompanied by colourful images and exciting music, may momentarily catch a young child's attention. However, their attention will not be retained unless such a programme is also understandable.
- Young children have been shown to be active and strategic viewers of television, who make clear decisions about whether to watch, or to continue watching, a programme on the basis of such factors as whether it is: entertaining, informative, relevant to their own experiences and, obviously, comprehensible.
- A television programme will be more likely to be comprehensible to young children if it:
 - ◆ reduces the number of events and causal relations within the story;
 - ◆ avoids including events that are not relevant to the main storyline;
 - ◆ is based upon an event or scenario that is familiar to the child;
 - ◆ is repeatedly viewed.
- A mosaic format is the most effective structure within which to develop a series of programmes for young children. It is a format similar to that used by *Sesame Street* and which is composed of a number of short, relatively self-contained sequences. This format allows prosocial behaviour to be repeatedly modelled in different ways and also ensures that storylines are short and simple and thus comprehensible. Because of its comprehensibility and relatively fast-paced approach, it is also more likely to gain and retain a young child's attention.
- However, one of the limitations of such a format is that it prevents the development of specific characters which is important if young children are to be encouraged to identify and thus empathise with them. It is therefore recommended

that, within the broadly mosaic format, a small number of regular characters are included who can provide continuity to the series while also appearing in particular sketches and thus providing depth to them.

- There have been over 3,000 studies conducted to date on the effects of television on young children's behaviour. However, the vast majority of these studies have been conducted in a rather artificial, laboratory-style manner. While they have tended to show some effect of particular television programmes on children's immediate post-viewing behaviour, very little research has been able to demonstrate the nature and extent of television's longer-term effects. Indeed strong criticisms exist of the whole 'scientific' approach to studying media effects that brings into question the validity of the data that does exist on the short-term influences of television.
- There is one finding from the research that is worthy of note, however, and it is that while children appear to be likely to generalise from the aggression viewed on television to engaging in aggressive behaviour in a range of other situations, this does not appear to be the case in relation to viewing prosocial behaviour. The research suggests that children who watch television characters engaging in prosocial behaviour are only likely to imitate the particular prosocial acts that they have seen. In contrast to violence on television, children are therefore not likely to engage in general prosocial behaviour as a response to watching television. The implication from this is that any television programme needs to model a diverse range of prosocial behaviours in order to encourage children to respond prosocially in a more general way.

4. Challenging Ethnic Prejudice Among Young Children

- Existing guidelines that have been produced for those working with young children in playgroups or schools emphasise four key factors that should be reflected in anti-sectarian work with them:
 - ◆ the need to take a holistic approach and ensure that the general ethos of the organisation and its policies, procedures and practices do not inadvertently encourage prejudicial attitudes and thinking;
 - ◆ that diversity should be positively promoted and children should be encouraged to value and respect the differences that exist;
 - ◆ that such work is most effective when developed within a child-centered approach;
 - ◆ that sectarian incidents among children need to be dealt with directly and positively.
- A television series has already been produced targeted at 14-17 year olds and aiming to encourage mutual respect and tolerance between Catholic and Protestant young people of this age group. The series, entitled *Off the Walls*, represents a professionally-made and imaginative approach that deals directly but sensitively with many controversial issues relating to politics, religion and identity.

- The proposed series of television programmes aimed at preschool children should be seen as an initial stage in an ‘anti-sectarian curriculum’ which gradually develops toward the more complex and sophisticated work represented by *Off the Walls*. In this sense, the particular aims and goals of the preschool programmes should not be seen as an end in themselves but as providing the basic building blocks from which particular issues in relation to sectarianism can be explored further and developed with children as they grow older.
- The Children’s Television Workshop have produced a Race Relations Curriculum for *Sesame Street* that broadly aims to:
 - ◆ teach children that physical differences are natural and good;
 - ◆ to emphasise that while differences exist, we have many things in common in relation to emotions, physical needs, abilities etc.;
 - ◆ encourage children to respect everyone, regardless of their physical appearance, and to believe it is good for people who are different to live, work and play together;
 - ◆ teach children how to respond positively when a child has been excluded or has been called names because of their appearance;
 - ◆ encourage children to view different colours and cultures positively;
 - ◆ to teach children that it is good and rewarding to experiment with different cultures (i.e. food, games, songs, clothes).
- In addition, the Children’s Television Workshop have also produced a series targeted at preschoolers in relation to the Israel/Palestinian conflict aimed at encouraging mutual respect among Arab and Jewish children. *Rechov Sumsum/Shara’a Sumsum* is based on two parallel streets (one Jewish, the other Arab) and shows how the two communities can live together in harmony.
- While *Rechov Sumsum/Shara’a Sumsum* also attempts to stress similarities and differences in a positive way as the Race Relations Curriculum does, it also includes two slightly different emphases relevant to the different circumstances of the Israeli/Palestine situation. The first reflects the greater degree of segregation that exists and places a higher emphasis on explaining and encouraging social interaction and co-operation between the two communities. The second is an attempt to model simple conflict resolution techniques for children and teach them such values as:
 - ◆ it is possible to maintain differences while eliminating conflict;
 - ◆ compromise is a necessary part of conflict resolution;
 - ◆ that maintaining conflict benefits no one while resolving conflict represents gains for everyone.

5. Guidelines

General portrayal of characters

Characters should be clearly identified as Catholic and Protestant. Only positive portrayals of Protestants and Catholics should be included.

Format of the programmes

A 'mosaic' format should be used as the basis for each programme but with the inclusion of a small number of regular characters.
Storylines should be clear and simple, involving only a few events and avoiding the inclusion of any event which is not central to the story.
Sequences should, as far as possible, involve settings that are familiar to young children.

Encouraging prosocial behaviour

The main emotions experienced by the principle characters should be identified and labelled.
Clear explanations should be given as to why a character is emotional.
Young children should be encouraged to understand that they are responsible for and capable of responding to the emotional state of others and appropriate strategies that they should adopt in relation to this should be modelled.

Valuing similarities and differences

The similarities that exist between Protestant and Catholic children should be highlighted.
Attention should be drawn to some of the positive differences that exist between Catholics and Protestants and young children should be encouraged to value and respect these.
It should be emphasised that it is good to be friends with someone from the other main tradition and to show an interest in and share aspects of their cultural heritage.
The benefits of Protestant and Catholic children co-operating and working together should be emphasised.

Dealing with sectarianism and conflict

It should be clearly stated that it is wrong to call someone names, physically hurt or exclude them simply because they are Catholic or Protestant.
Appropriate responses to being called a sectarian name or observing another child call someone else a sectarian name should be modelled.
Appropriate responses to another child being excluded from a group because of his or her religion should be modelled.
Appropriate ways of resolving conflict between Catholic and Protestant children should be modelled.