

# Consultation Response

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## The Future of Children's Television December 2007

### Introduction

Children in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the OFCOM consultation on the future of children's television programming. Television is an important and, in many cases, central source of entertainment, education and information for children of all ages. It can enhance their social, cognitive and cultural development at the same time as providing a means of relaxing and enjoyment.

Although the evidence suggests that children spend too much time watching television and too little time playing outdoors, exercising (or reading), the decreasing number of hours and percentage of quality children's television programming is a problem. The absence of quality children's programming does not result in less television viewing by children. It only results in more children watching more television that was not created with them and which, too often, is developmentally inappropriate for them.

Television remains a powerful tool, which is neither inherently good or inherently bad. For instance, it has the potential to support (or undermine) the messages received from parents and schools. At this point in history, TV shapes, as well as reflects culture. Children in Scotland is particularly keen to stress the importance of a diverse and representative allocation of programming across the UK. It was notable that specific (and brief) mention of Scotland was made only in relation to BBC Scotland as a component of the BBC. STV and the role and presence of Gaelic programming was not featured in the Review, despite the attention given to comparative networks such as S4C.

Scotland does not produce a notable amount of children's programming. This in itself is valuable information that should be highlighted by OFCOM and changed for the better in practice. The underdevelopment of Scottish children's shows (an inevitable consequence of lack of support for 'homegrown' Scottish programming) is lamentable, especially given the televisions' importance in supporting (or undermining) local culture and national identity. This problem also is entirely correctable, as there is relevant talent already residing within, or easily attractable to, Scotland.

Children in Scotland would like OFCOM to consider a number of other concerns, including: the importance of seeking and respecting the views of children and young people about the future of television; the value of better research on the effects of TV programming on children's development and behaviour; and, the impact of advertising upon child well-being (whether targeted directly to children and young people or to their mothers/fathers/carers).

### Definition of children's television

Broadcasters (and the funders/policymakers involved with the television industry) need to be clear about why and how children's television should differ from adult television. They

also need to clearly distinguish between the developmental stages of children and not to regard or treat them as a homogenous group. In practice, programmers currently target 4 groups: preschool, 6-8, 9-12 and 13-15 year-olds. Each group has distinct preferences and needs from television that should be identified at a policy level. It is not enough to measure provision to all children, or to have one set of standards for all children.

### **Views of children and young people**

The research quoted in the Review made mention of “consultation” with children and young people. The quantitative research on children and young people’s current preferences and habits is research, *not consultation* in any meaningful sense. Children and young people, alongside parents, should be key informants in the future direction of children’s TV programming. Asking children and young people what role TV could/should play in their lives is far more important than asking them what programmes they watch.

Children and young people’s perspectives on the content, uses and impacts of television . is an undeveloped area of activity, to which OFCOM should give priority attention. Gathering and taking seriously the views of children and young people should form an important part of the consultation process and become an ongoing part of planning, developing and assessing television broadcasting. This is also in keeping with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which states that children’s views must be considered and taken into account in all matters affecting them.<sup>1</sup>

### **Education**

Children get a great deal of information – intended and unintended, helpful and unhelpful - - from television. TV can be very successful as an educational resource helping children to learn about subjects such as history, geography, languages, music, art, nature, as well as maths and English. However, in a devolved environment, linking too closely to any one educational agenda or curriculum would be problematic.

As well as helping children to learn about core subjects such as maths and English television can be a useful tool to raise awareness about – and dealing with -- social issues such as bullying, healthy lifestyles, drugs, smoking, alcohol, mental health and sexual health, as well as issues about gender, race, disability and equalities. Children and young people are increasingly faced with complex emotional problems and stressful situations that can take a toll on their mental, emotional and physical wellbeing. Using television to raise awareness (and present factually accurate information) about these issues, as well as signposting avenues of advice and support, is one way in which broadcasters can demonstrate social responsibility. Formal and social educational programmes for children and young people are important, but fun and entertaining programmes also have their place and should be encouraged in their own right.

### **Role of BBC Scotland**

Children in Scotland believes that Scottish-specific programmes should be much more heavily invested in and encouraged from a variety of sources. As well as learning about other cultures and identities within and outwith Scotland, such programming should encourage children to learn about their own local communities, histories and cultures. Place-based learning should be greater priority in television programming as well as in educational institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*, 1989

*Balamory*, the children's programme set in Mull in Scotland, was successful across the UK. It was particularly valuable in Scotland, where children could identify with accents and places. Programmes that link to familiar places and activities in children and young people's lives are important to build a sense of place and a sense of culture. Broadcasters may want to give thought to commissioning programmes specific to local/regional areas.

### **Violence on television**

The research evidence over many years, and across many nations is clear that there are real and significant connections between violence on television, children's attitudes toward violence and the likelihood of violent behaviour. Rarely is there a direct causal relationship in which violence viewed by a child persuades that child to reenact that violence personally and immediately (although such cases are disturbing).

The research indicates two far more general consequences. First, children tend to become emotionally 'immune' to violence – that is, they tend to become less and less upset or disturbed by witnessing acts of violence on TV. Second, a consistent diet of violence on television results in children who view violence as a commonplace, acceptable, normal way of responding to their own anger, frustration, disagreements or jealousy. It appears that these negative consequences for child development increase not only with the amount of violence viewed by children on television, but also with the degree to which it is realistic and adult (rather than cartoon-like or silly).

Scotland has a problem with knife violence and physical assaults, the 'hardman' as a cultural icon; and bullying. Television did not single-handedly create these problems and cannot single-handedly solve them. Children in Scotland does not suggest a total ban of all violent programming on television, as that 'solution' is both unrealistic and too extreme.

However, there are four steps that could and should be taken rigorously and quickly. First, increase the amount of attractive, non-violent children's programming, so that watching violent adult TV shows is not the *default* response of children who cannot find anything better to watch. Second, restrict very violent programming to times and channels that are less easily accessible to children and thus, less likely to include young viewers. Third, regulate TV programming so that the profound negative consequences of violence (immediate and long-term, physical and emotional) are made explicit. Fourth, strengthen the availability of media literacy courses and other forms of media education that increase the awareness and sophistication of children as consumers of television programming. Again, we recommend consulting with children and young people themselves about how best to deal with the problems caused by violence on television

### **Advertising**

Children in Scotland believe that more needs to be done to prevent the negative influence of advertising on children and young people. We welcome the announcement by the UK Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families on 12 December 2007 that a panel of experts will investigate the potential damage caused by the impact of commercialization at a younger age. Children in Scotland also believes that as both television and the Internet operate across borders, OFCOM should be working with its European counterparts to establish EU norms and ethics.

Concerns about the commercialization of children through adverts should be recognized and heeded. It is particularly relevant for children who are still too young to understand the

concept of an advert. Advertising to parents through children's channels does not address the concerns around children's exposure to advertising. This may allow broadcasters to secure an income, but it also influences very young children through sophisticated marketing that is beyond their developmental ability to discount or place in context..

However, Children in Scotland recognizes that not all advertising is bad advertising. Adverts encouraging healthy behaviour such as dental hygiene, better sexual health, and safety adverts do have a place on TV, as they are a source of information and advice that is in the best interests of the child. This is, and should be, distinguished from marketing and branding exercises aimed directly at children, or at parents through their children.

### **Plurality in the provision of children's programming.**

Plurality of choice benefits children in the same way as it does adults. However, high quality, socially responsible, entertaining and original programmes are arguably the priority. If finance is a major issue in a plural system, then less choice and better quality programming is preferable.

### **Other media platforms**

Media communication needs to advance in line with children's technological progression if it is to remain relevant to their lives. High quality public service content aimed at the various age groups should be provided through all relevant platforms. Children should be consulted directly on this issue, as on all the other major topics in the Review.

**Children in Scotland** is Scotland's national agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that policies, services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society.

Children in Scotland represents over 400 members, including all major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professional organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children's services. It is linked with similar agencies in other parts of the UK and the European Union.

The work of Children in Scotland encompasses extensive information, policy, research and practice development programmes. The agency works closely with MSPs, the Scottish Executive, local authorities and practitioners. It also services a number of groups such as: the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People; the National Children's Voluntary Forum; and the National Early Years Forum. Children in Scotland also hosts Enquire, the national advice service for additional support for learning.