

Children and Television: A Global Perspective by Dafna Lemish.
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Millions of teachers, parents, and policymakers around the world love or love to hate television. From learning to count with *Sesame Street* characters to learning about conflicts in the Middle East on *CNN* or learning about feminism by watching a *Spice Girls* music video, there is no denying that television teaches. It teaches children facts, figures, behaviors, values, cultural norms, and worldviews. Yet the worlds depicted on television have been at the heart of decades-old debates about the influence of television on children.

In *Children and Television: A Global Perspective*, Israeli scholar Dafna Lemish sets the stage for a new era of research by thoroughly reviewing and critically examining scholarly and activist activity on “one of the most shared and homogenizing mechanisms of children’s lives today” (p. 2). The result is a theoretically and methodologically rich global treasure chest of accumulated literature from the last 50 years. From direct effects research and field experiments to correlational and ethnographic studies to discussion of displacement effects, deficiency models, arousal, and social learning theories, Lemish seamlessly threads together research, approaches, and theories from multiple disciplines.

Lemish’s world tour of theory and research on children and television includes seven chapters and an impressive reference list. Five themes on the relationship between children and television emerge: age, gender, context, content, and potential. Lemish maintains that researchers and educators need to account for a child’s age and gender, the social context within which childhood is constructed, the television content a child is exposed to, and the pedagogical potential of the medium.

According to Lemish, television will continue to complement and compete with other more traditional socializing agents such as family, schools, peer groups, community, and religious institutions. Through socialization, children learn about their culture and often internalize values, beliefs, and perceptions of self and of others. Social construction of reality research cited in the text includes studies of gender and gender roles on television, perceptions of class and violence in the United States, and the “Mean World” hypothesis. According to the Mean World hypothesis, constant viewing of television violence may desensitize viewers because they become used to violence and less anxious while watching it, thus cultivating a worldview based on fear, distrustfulness, and a strong sense of vulnerability. Studies examining the Mean World hypothesis measure attitudes by ranking responses to questions from the “Mean World Index” such as:

- Do you think people are usually helpful or only concerned for themselves?

- Do you think people will try to take advantage of you if they get a chance or do they try to be fair?
- As a general rule, would you say that you can trust people or that you can never be careful enough? (p. 122)

For cultural studies researchers, ideology embedded in television scripts and images is at the heart of socialization: “It [television] constantly reinforces certain ideological, methodological, and factual patterns of thought and so functions to define the world and to legitimize the existing social order” (p. 101). The dominance of White middle-class characters, lifestyles, and cultures on American television is an example of how television may reinforce and legitimate existing social orders in the United States and abroad. The author cites numerous studies on how stereotypical portrayals of ethnic and social minorities, such as African Americans or disabled people, affect, both positively and negatively, children’s perceptions of “others.”

Educators would likely find chapters 5 and 6 the most relevant to their day-to-day activities and research interests. Lemish reasons that while television and schools teach, they are not the same because each has its own distinct culture. Broadcasters usually have no educational or instructional intentions, clear curriculum, or formalized set of goals. Schools, on the other hand, have specific institutional goals, languages, and missions. Another important, often overlooked distinction is the child’s perspective. Many children prefer television over school because it is an activity they enter into voluntarily, it makes no demands upon them, and it provides pleasure: “Television, thus, seems to offer an alternative way of learning about the world and oneself that threatens the central place that the school system has had in the education of children” (p. 151).

The author offers numerous reasons why television may be eroding the centrality of school systems. According to Lemish, television offers children a break from the hierarchical, mandatory schooling in most societies. At school, children must progress in a fixed order, whereas with television anyone can participate without previous knowledge or prerequisites. Lemish also makes the point that schooling requires self-restraint and that the time invested in studying languages, mathematics, history, or geography is a part of a long process with vaguely defined goals. Television, on the other hand, offers children immediate, emotion-filled satisfaction; “television’s preoccupation with interpersonal relationships, struggles of good and evil or love and hate among other themes may seem to many children to be much more relevant, attractive, and exciting than many of the topics studied in school that often seem irrelevant and removed from children’s reality” (p. 150).

In order to move schools back to the center or, at the very least, equal footing with television, Lemish introduces the reader to media literacy strategies and programs from around the world. For educators, “media literacy is an

opportunity to challenge traditional education institutions by experiment with alternative pedagogies” (p. 182). While there is no one widely accepted definition of media literacy, to be media literate typically means to be able to critically analyze, evaluate, and interpret media messages.

Lemish details several media literacy success stories that help develop life-long “investigation into the ways in which we search for meaning and create it through media texts, and the investigation of the ways others do the same for us” (p. 183). Success stories include educational intervention programs from England, Israel, and, in particular, South Africa, where the development of “civic courage”—the courage to express an opinion, resist, or offer alternatives—was a key component of media literacy curricula. According to Lemish, the South African media literacy model not only encouraged students to become critical readers and viewers of media but opened the classroom up to discussion of social and moral issues, thus enabling students to see the world through the perspective of others, “be it an ‘other’ by nature of race, gender, class, or political stance” (p. 188).

Lemish constantly reinforces the importance of media literacy, culture, and context throughout the text. Her main argument that children from different cultures may interpret the same media message differently is a key strength: “A child living in Palestine, Chechnya, and Iraq may react completely differently to a scene depicting tanks and soldiers, than one living in New Zealand, Italy, and Uruguay” (p. 32). This serves as a useful reminder to researchers, educators, and activists to examine their own cultural biases when conceptualizing and conducting studies or designing programs.

The book is in some ways refreshing because many of the theories and perspectives cited originated in countries other than the United States. At the same time, the media products examined were often American. This is largely due to the effects of globalization. As a result, “children all over the world sing similar pop tunes, wear similar clothing and drink the same soft drinks” (p. 214). Thus, it is understandable that a text examining children and television from a global perspective would include studies of similar, often American, music, television programs and films.

Dafna Lemish is a Professor in the Department of Communication at Tel Aviv University and editor of *Journal of Children and Media*. She has been studying children and television for nearly three decades in the United States, Europe, and Israel. The more than 20-page reference list demonstrates the depth and diversity of her research. It seems there are few scholars better positioned than Lemish to bridge the gaps between research, theory, practice, and policy on a global scale.

Children and Television: A Global Perspective is an excellent resource for researchers as well as undergraduate and graduate students of education,

psychology, and mass communication. Teachers and activists may also find the text useful because of its scope, international examples, practical media literacy strategies, and policy suggestions. Lemish's work spans the global village for research on children and television. The result is a multidisciplinary map of theory and research relevant to anyone interested in the often contested intellectual and cultural terrain of children and television.

Reviewer

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