

Growing up with TV

FAMILY life, with all its ups and downs, is a constant presence on our television screens. There is a huge public appetite for guidance on parenting. In September 2006 a MORI poll with a representative sample of 3938 adults across Great Britain, for the National Family and Parenting Institute, showed that most parents with young children have watched at least one 'parenting' television programme and more than three quarters of these parents said that they had adopted a parenting technique and had found it helpful to them personally.

Developmental psychology has much to offer parents, and clearly television programmes are a potent way of reaching large numbers of parents, but this particular knowledge transfer is not an easy matter. The messages that we might wish to transmit do not necessarily sit well with the priorities and narrative styles of broadcasters.

In this article, we reflect on our experience of working at the interface between academic research and public broadcasting, through our work on the BBC1 series *Child of Our Time*, affectionately known as 'Coot'.

An extended family

Coot is a unique project, of which the prime-time broadcasts on BBC1 are only one facet (see figure opposite). Starting in 1999, 22 couples were filmed as they prepared for the births of their 'millennium babies'. Since then, they have been followed and filmed year-on-year to build a rich record of the progress of the children and their families. The filming has covered life in the family homes, and the children's and parents' experiences in other settings, such as work, playgroups and school classes. There has also been a series of assessments and observations made of the parents and children, based around techniques used by psychologists. In addition, numerous experts have been brought in to comment on various topics and on the children's and parents' participation in 'tests'.

The committed aim of the project is to follow this cohort of families until the children are 20 years old; the longest-running project in the BBC's history. The focus will continue to be on 'what makes us what we are'.

The Open University joined the project as a co-production partner in 2002 and has been developing its involvement



JOHN OATES and DAVID MESSER
on their maturing relationship with the BBC's *Child of Our Time*, which returns in 2007.

substantially since then. Working on the production of the broadcasts involves planning the themes for forthcoming series, developing ideas for assessments and activities for the families to illustrate the themes, and participating in the final narrative and editing work for the programmes. At the same time, we are working on building content for the

'The programme opens up alternative visions of parenting'

website on Open2.net, commissioning essays and designing interactive materials, downloads and surveys for the site, and producing sets of activity cards, linked with the programme themes, for parents to order from the Open University. Print runs of 50,000 cards were fully taken up.

The public interest in Coot offerings is massive. Viewing figures for the series regularly exceed 4 or 5 million, with very high audience appreciation ratings. The traffic to the website immediately following the broadcasts is also very high and continues at high levels for some weeks. Enquiries to the Open University following on from the broadcasts, website and cards have been running at over 40,000 a year for the last two years. The OU considers that the cost of dealing with this volume is economically justified in terms of follow-through into entry level courses and other educational offerings.

For the last three years, we have added survey activities to the site, collecting data from children and adults on topics such as self-image, leisure preferences, expectations of parents and lifestyle choices. The website also shows summaries of these data as they build. For the 2006 series the survey was based on established research instruments and is gathering data on links among self-esteem, optimism, locus of control and moral action choices. Initial analyses from more than 16,000 respondents' data were presented at the 2006 BPS Developmental

Psychology Section conference, and are featured on the Coot website.

Concerns and issues

Concerns are often aired about the impact on families of participating in television programmes. The families in the Coot project are always consulted about the content of the programmes, and are shown edited versions for their comments. Sometimes, one or other family member does not want to be shown in a particular programme, and these wishes are always respected.

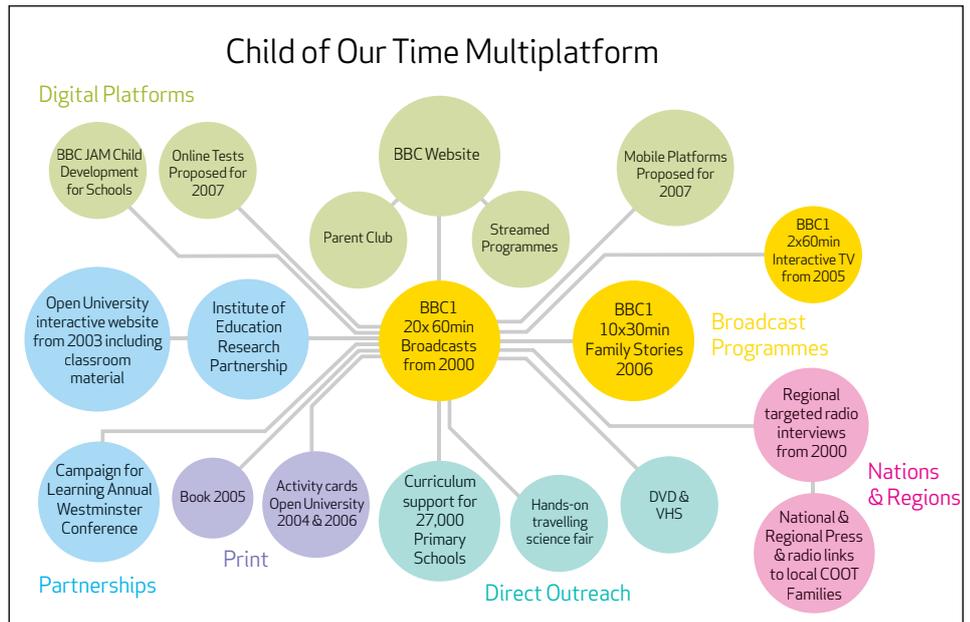
Negotiating informed consent for participation is something that is an ongoing process with the families, and there is also a conscious effort on the part of the production team to renew consent (or perhaps more accurately, assent) from the children as well, in terms that they can understand. The BBC has a comprehensive code for working with families, which is included in the guidelines that every producer is required to follow, and the Coot production team has developed substantial

additional guidance for the unique nature of the long-term involvement with these 22 families.

It is not sensible to draw direct parallels between television programme making and research ethics guidelines such as those of the British Psychological Society or the British Educational Research Association, since one of the common key principles in these research ethics codes – the preservation of anonymity – is clearly not feasible for broadcasts. However, the underlying principles of respect for individuals' autonomy and well-being are most definitely applicable, and the procedures followed by the Coot production are explicitly designed to follow these ethics.

One aspect of this is taking pains not to encroach on the individuals' privacy, and although Coot does show family life, the aim is not to be invasive in so doing. Linked to this is the ethic of confidentiality. Information collected from or given by the families, where they wish this to remain confidential, is closely protected by BBC protocols which conform with the requirements of the Data Protection Act.

The showing of each year's new Coot series is often the stimulus for local news stories, and the families do gain a sense of value from being featured in this way. At the same time, Coot quite consciously does not seek to make the families into 'stars'.



In a way, it is the ordinariness of the families that makes them special. According to Rachel Coughlan, the series producer: 'Although this is an on-going project, we don't spend 12 months a year with the families. We pick out key events for filming. Some of the families have told me that although they regard their participation in the project as important, they also recognise that it is just a part of their life and for the rest of the time their lives tick over like any other family.'

Another more general concern involves the context and implicit messages of the programmes. We see one of the strengths of the Coot series as providing viewers with examples of children's development and information about research findings, but without a strong message about what are the right and wrong things to do. The very diversity of the families in terms of their structure, environments and resources provide contrasts that raise questions about whether or not you as the viewer would respond in a similar way. Similarly, the way families cope with difficulties and the views of parents about 'doing the best' for their children can raise similar questions about one's own beliefs and assumptions.

Thus, a considerable strength of the programme is that it opens up alternative visions of parenting, and allows viewers to think more generally about this process with examples that are located outside of their normal environment and experience. Viewers should be empowered by being able to think about issues themselves and to make their own decisions. Rather than

experts providing a standard recipe for parenting, issues are often left open so that parents can think about the contrasts and come to their own view about what would be best to do.

There is an important issue here about the more general context in which psychologists wish their findings and expertise to be communicated. The media, more generally, are often interested in what is 'best' for children. However, it is often not recognised by those in the media that this question has to be unpicked not just in terms of psychological outcomes, but also in terms of value systems. In concrete terms this can involve thinking about what activities and behaviours are generally thought to be 'best', but also taking into consideration that such activities and behaviours are not valued by all. Furthermore, there are so many dimensions on which to carry out this discussion it almost becomes an impossible task.

Often psychologists are reluctant to go beyond their normal expertise to engage in this debate, a territory that is unfamiliar to many of us. However, it is one that increasingly needs to be addressed in relation to what some would see as desirable government support to parents and children and others see as the 'nanny state' taking away individual decision making. Our own view is that it can be useful to move away from these opposites to a consideration of not only the immediate effects of advice and intervention on children's behaviours, but also the way in which parents feel that their

self-esteem, control and autonomy have been affected by their experiences.

A two-way relationship

Work on Coot provides a very useful model for the way that the needs of the media and psychologists can be met. It is important that programmes adopting this genre meet the agenda for public broadcasting by containing informative and relevant content. Consequently, programme makers like to include the latest ideas and theories, but there are risks for them in focusing on maverick opinions. Often programme makers will spend quite a bit of time talking to a range of researchers to build up a picture of current thinking about a topic. Even though these conversations may not directly feed into a programme, they provide an extremely valuable context.

Useful ideas come out of these conversations about how psychological theory and findings can challenge or support commonsense views about child development; for example the way that giving rewards for drawing reduces children's liking of the activity in comparison to children who do not receive any rewards.

Naturally enough there are pressures to maintain a large audience to justify funding of the programme. As a result, a compromise has to be reached between informing and entertaining. Sometimes it can seem that academic psychologists reject this compromise by their emphasis on informing rather than entertaining. They can be caricatured as being primarily interested in the reactions of a limited number of fellow experts rather than those of the millions of viewers, in over-elevating their own interests, and a preference for long, complex and difficult-to-understand messages with many 'ifs and buts'.

BBC CHILD OF OUR TIME

Happily this description is very much a caricature. Most psychologists recognise that entertainment helps with communicating information, and this often has formed a basis for productive relations.

We have been impressed by how keen the Coot producers are to discuss and explore modern ideas from developmental psychology theory and research, and to work with us on turning these into entertaining, as well as informative, viewing. An example from the 2006 series was translating issues about locus of control into a task where children had to carry a full bowl of water without spilling it, and asking children whether the inevitable messy spill was due to the difficulty of the task or their own inability. This was probably more interesting and memorable for many viewers than seeing a child answer a set of psychometric questions. Rachel Coughlan comments: 'Quite often the tests that we use for the purposes of television have to be made more visual whilst retaining their validity and we have found that our psychology academics have been open and willing in helping us achieve this. They also guide us in terms of the themes that are appropriate for the age of the children, and evaluate some of the assessments in order to make a particular point clear to our audience. The synergy between the television and the website works extremely well for our audience, who are able to follow up themes in the programme in greater depth if they so wish. This is an area we are keen to expand in the future.'

Towards the future

Psychologists are becoming much more aware of the increasing pressures to inform a wider audience. There is an obligation to communicate publicly funded research findings, and when applying for research funding there is increasingly a box that has to be filled about 'dissemination of research'. There also is a growing awareness that public interest in psychological research can feed into positive views about research funding, and can even encourage student uptake of higher and further education.

Thus, there is a measure of inter-dependence. Programme makers need up-to-date expert advice to provide credibility for a programme as well as helping to meet with public agenda and well-being issues. Researchers can benefit, albeit indirectly, from public interest and understanding.

There is a strong wish amongst those of us in the Open University and the BBC who are involved with *Child of Our Time* to strengthen the synergies between research and the project. The British Psychological Society has recently given public engagement funding for additional content production for the Coot website, to provide more extended and in-depth coverage of developmental psychology topics. Also, the ESRC has commissioned a scoping study which is exploring how links can be built between the *Child of Our Time* resources and research activities, such as the Millennium Cohort Study and other large surveys. This study is being carried out by a team of researchers including ourselves. We would be very interested in hearing from anyone who would like to contribute to this ongoing work.

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DISCUSS AND DEBATE

What key messages from psychological research would be of most value for parents?

How can parents be encouraged to evaluate 'parenting' messages critically?

Is there a value in giving more attention to children's voices in debates around parenting?

What 'blue sky' ideas can we come up with to improve public engagement with psychological research through a variety of media?

Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. E-mail 'Letters' on psychologist@bps.org.uk or contribute to our forum via www.thepsychologist.org.uk.

WEBLINKS

Open University Child of Our Time site:

www.open2.net/childofourtime/2006/index.html

BBC site: www.bbc.co.uk/parenting/

tv_and_radio/child_of_our_time

BBC JAM child development materials, using

footage from Coot to provide curriculum

enrichment for GCSE Psychology:

<https://jam.bbc.co.uk>



Call for Submissions

The mass media are ubiquitous in the lives of young people. From infancy to adulthood, the young are exposed to and select from a wide range of contents and experiences available in television, radio, music, print media, computers, the Internet, videogames, electronic communications and other new technologies. The young are typically at the forefront when it comes to uses of 'traditional' and new media.

Despite the ecological salience of the media, research into the many ways in which they intersect with developmental processes is relatively scarce. To this extent, developmental psychology risks failing to take into account the everyday contexts of contemporary childhood, and neglects some of the most motivating arenas in which cognitive, social and affective development takes place.

This Special Issue aims to present the best current work into young people and media, and to stimulate an expansion of research into a range of topics with extensive implications for basic and applied developmental science.

Empirical studies of media in the lives of infants, children and adolescents are invited.

Topics of interest include, but are not restricted to:

- Developmental changes in the uses and comprehension of media; Media and skills development; The use of media for educational interventions.
- Media and social learning; Family context, home life and media consumption; Media and citizenship in the young; Intergenerational transmission of media interests and attitudes to media; Media and peer relations; Identity development and media use.
- Media and young people's health; Affective dimensions of media use.
- Young people and advertising; Development of critical media skills.
- Psychological processes in computer mediated communications; Uses and understanding of the Internet.
- Uses of media by special populations.

Authors are encouraged to pay particular attention to the implications of their work for the broader understanding of developmental processes. For this reason descriptive studies of patterns of usage, content analyses, and studies that focus only on media literacy programmes, are unlikely to fit with the overall goals of the Special Issue. Authors should consult the Guest Editors if they are in doubt about the relevance of a submission.

Submission deadline: 30 September 2007

Method of submission: All manuscripts, which should be clearly labelled as submissions intended for this Special Issue, must be submitted through BJDP's Editorial Manager, which can be accessed from the journal's website at: www.bpsjournals.co.uk/bjdp

All manuscripts will be sent out for anonymous peer review, following the usual procedures of BJDP. Authors should consult the BJDP's Notes for Contributors for further information about the journal's submission requirements.

For further information about the Special Issue, please contact either Kevin Durkin kevin.durkin@strath.ac.uk or Mark Blades m.blades@sheffield.ac.uk.