

# Effects of Radio on Children

CHILD STUDY ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

THE CHILD STUDY ASSOCIATION has been concerned for some time with the number of inquiries which it receives from parents in regard to radio programs for children. The Association has recently distributed a simple questionnaire to mothers in its study groups which are conducted at the Association's headquarters thruout the year under the direction of Mrs. Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg, who is director of the Association; Mrs. Marion M. Miller, associate director; and Mrs. Cecile Pilpel, director of study groups.

The results of this questionnaire are contained in a report of the replies received from eighty women, mothers of 134 children—seventy-one boys, and sixty-three girls, ranging in age from two to fifteen.

The Association does not consider this report either exhaustive in its scope or conclusive in its findings. Its importance lies in the fact that it indicates the trend of thought of intelligent parents.

**What children like to hear**—Music that comes over the radio makes an appeal to many babies, just as does music from any other source. This was definitely reported as early as six months in one case, and by a year and a half or two it seems to be quite general. It is several years, however, before "programs" have any meaning. At four and five there is some interest in special programs, particularly if there is an older child in the family. At six this carry-over of interest seems to reach the first of two high spots. [Does going to school perhaps give children a chance to compare notes and to stimulate each other's curiosity?] Intensive interest then appears to lull until about the age of ten. From ten to twelve or thirteen is the heyday of the radio, particularly of continued sketches and "thrillers." After that, the 'teen age becomes more selective—sports, current events, dance music, and science begin to be mentioned.

This pattern seems to be fairly general. Most children at any age "enjoy" the radio, since only nineteen are reported as indifferent and six as definitely disliking it—and these at scat-

tered ages. But of the remaining 109, just nineteen are described by their mothers as radio "fans," and these are with only three exceptions in the ten-to-thirteen-year-old group.

The amount of time spent at the radio fits into the same picture. Twenty children at ages varying from five to fifteen spend an hour a day listening; fourteen at ages from six to thirteen spend two hours; nine at ages eight to twelve [five of these are twelve] spend three hours; and one boy of thirteen spends five hours. The remaining ninety are reported as spending half an hour, fifteen minutes, or an irregular amount of time. It was not asked whether the children "did nothing else but" while the radio was on. But from the number of programs followed closely and

from the mothers' general comments it seems likely that listening is not exclusive when it takes up a couple of hours or more.

One mother disapproves particularly of her fifteen-year-old son's "ear massage" in his room. Another says in more detail:

It is, on the whole, a distracting influence. The fact that the radio keeps humming while he works on French or geometry is very disconcerting to me. [This is the boy who listens five hours a day.] For he claims that he pays no attention to it—but that he *needs* it to keep him at his work. It implies a division of interest—a lack of concentration of which I disapprove.

Most of the children who follow continued programs from day to day fall, as we would expect, in the six-year-old group or in the ten-to-thirteen-year-old group. The sixes usually follow one or two programs; the older children who are regular "fans" keep up with two, three, or four. Their preferences run strongly to continued dramatic sketches and comedy programs. But of those who do like music, just as many like concert music as the jazz and dance variety. Only one mentions French and dancing lessons, and one, Sunday morning worship service. In general, they like programs designed for adults better than programs for children, performed *by* children. But their preference over both these is far and away in favor of programs by adult performers but designed particularly *for* children.



WALLACE L. KADDERLY, manager of radio station KOAC, and fulltime staff members. KOAC is located at Corvallis, Oregon, is a state-owned station, and is an integral part of the general extension division of the Oregon state system of higher education, of which Dr. William J. Kerr is chancellor. Those pictured in the front row from left to right are: Anthony Euwer, wellknown poet and lecturer, announcer, and featured program contributor; Mr. Kadderly; Mrs. Zelta Rodenwold, director of women's programs; Byron Arnold, music advisor and accompanist; Oliver D. Perkins, operator; rear row: James Morris, announcer; Luke Lea Roberts, music director and chief announcer; Grant Feikert, engineer; Don Kneass, announcer; C. R. Briggs, director of farm and related programs. KOAC, like other college stations, secures, without expense, talent that would cost commercial stations hundreds of thousand of dollars.

In all but nine of these homes there is just one family radio in the living room, dining room, or sun parlor. [The nine were either hotel residents or older boys with a radio in their own rooms.] It might, therefore, be assumed that its use or abuse would be important to all the members of the family. But only about one-fourth of the mothers said they find it necessary to make definite restrictions as to time and in almost all these cases their children are the ones who actually listen an hour or more. Several mothers felt that it is "just hopeless," but the majority do not make any restrictions at all.

Does radio make for more companionship in the family or not? Very few children between six and twelve listen to the radio in company with their parents. Young children, apparently, accept their parents' choices and adolescents begin to share their tastes. But the school-age children definitely want to turn the radio on for themselves—they will not listen to programs tuned in by their parents and they do "want what *they* want when they want it."

Between the children themselves the radio makes a bond of common interest. Only seven mothers say their children disagree over it, and more than a quarter of them decidedly say that it prevents quarrels and gives children of different ages a pleasure which they can happily share.

But it does interfere with other interests—on this there is more agreement among the parents than on any other point. "Family conversation" is the greatest sufferer, with reading and music practise close seconds, and with mention also made of group games, creative play, crafts, singing, bath, and supper.

**From the grownup point of view**—What do parents think of all this? It is impossible to give a single composite answer, for their opinions vary from one extreme to the other. There are only eighteen who declare for unqualified disapproval in such terms as these:

Too interested in sensational.  
Terrible.  
Jazz supersedes everything. Damning.  
Too exciting.  
Too stereotyped, sentimental, unreal. It fails where it could be of great benefit.  
False ideas and emotional reactions.  
Murder stories are bad.  
Not educational; a waste of time.  
The sheer impossibility and obviousness of the melodramatic. I class it with the funnies.

In some of the children's programs, the English is *terrible*; it is stupid stuff.

I question very often the entertainer's wisdom when he mentions behavior problems.

Does not promote a great interest in good music.

I believe my daughter would appreciate concert music more if she hadn't heard so many jazz programs.

I've no sympathy with night-club entertainers. Except for an occasional symphony concert I should not consider it beneficial.

My friends with children from seven on are perfectly frantic over the effect of the radio on the children. They say the programs are sensational nonsense, and their children are made nervous and develop fears they have never had before—fear of the dark—fear of men's voices if they are rough or deep. One mother says her children have developed a feeling of evil in the world. I know of one family where the interest in listening keeps the children glued to the radio from five o'clock on, to the distinct limitation of other play or activities. In another case, the child insists on having a loud speaker in her own room so she can listen after she goes to bed.

On the other hand, a few parents feel, as one said, that it is "all to the good," either as a social or an educational asset:

It is a pleasant diversion and addition to family companionship.

It brings recreation and pleasure to 'teen age groups at home.

It affords good information.

My boy is not interested in books. Unless compeled, he will not open the covers of one. I am very pleased at the interest he takes in these radio programs as I feel it is something to stimulate his imagination.

The radio has made my son alert to the news of the day. He reads the newspaper intelligently and correlates his information. I'm sure the terse snatches of news gleaned via radio have helped in this development.

I believe the radio plays an important educational rôle in my daughter's life. Without the radio, she would have little access to the outside world.

A small number of mothers feel that radio is simply negative and does not have much influence one way or the other. Not a few who question certain programs discount their "bad influence" because they feel that the preoccupation with one program or another is so transient.

This radio craze is a phase which the child is bound to outgrow. So I am not opposing her in any *obvious* way. I am patient with her and prefer to let the passion run its course, meanwhile offering pleasurable alternatives and hoping that some day she may find a new enthusiasm.

I know that eventually she will return to her reading and to her drawing. The encroachment of the radio simply makes it more difficult.

There are all sorts of expressions of this same desire to see both sides of the question:

The radio makes me a bit furious. It could be so marvelous from an educational and cultural point of view—but instead it is such a mess. And when a mother comes home to a house where three are running at

**W**HEREAS it has come to the attention of the Board of Managers of the Iowa Congress of Parents and Teachers, that many parents are protesting against certain radio programs given for children; that as a result of listening to certain radio programs children are reported to be afraid of the dark, afraid of walking in front of anyone on the street, afraid even of listening to these programs without an adult near them; and *Whereas* these parents feel that many such programs are producing distinctly unhealthy mental conditions in children—*Therefore* be it resolved that the Board of Managers of the Iowa Congress of Parents and Teachers go on record as opposing the commercial exploitation of children by means of radio programs of mystery stories, danger situations, and other so-called thrills whose chief appeal to the child's interest is thru fear for himself or for a real or imaginary character in the story; and be it further resolved that a copy of this resolution be sent to all advertisers using time in the Children's Hour, to Mr. Joy Elmer Morgan, chairman of the National Committee on Education by Radio, and to the radio chairman of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers.—Resolution adopted by the Board of Managers of the Iowa Congress of Parents and Teachers, February 8, 1933.

one time—each with a sillier program than the next—oh dear! At the same time the radio gives one Toscanini and *The Emperor Jones*. You want to smash it and you want to worship it.

A good many seem to share this desire both to laud and to condemn—some of them adding that much of the really good music comes after the children are asleep. Others who specify that most dramatic sketches are “too exciting,” and “murderous,” or “cheap” and “silly” still feel that on the whole the good outweighs the bad.

Several say they do not object to the radio in itself so much as in the crowding out, already referred to, of “achievements” and “creative interests.”

I like to see children get their pleasure thru participating. I suppose one can feel about radio as about books, that no child's taste is good to begin with, but will develop as general development goes on. Too great a time spent in listening to the radio by a child, if the interest continues for a long time, disconcerts me, for I feel that the child is wasting a lot of his time.

There is just as much place, particularly at the end of the day, for relaxation in the life of a busy child as of a busy adult. This is a point frequently stressed:

I especially like this hour, because it makes for a rest physically before dinner.

The radio has a place as relaxation and fun. I don't think it does any harm and the children have a right to their own choice. They pick up much information. It is a source of relaxation—but it would be *awful* if not controlled.

Thus the large group of mothers which is moved neither to condemn nor praise is not taking a middle course thru indifference. There is a real effort to get perspective on this most modern and most universal interest and to relate its “problems” both to our social setting as a whole and to the intimate life within the family.

I don't think we can eliminate radio from the modern set-up. Concerning modern tools and mediums, my feeling has always been that instead of side-stepping them, we should attempt to use them in a constructive fashion. For example, my children have learned to be critical of the children's programs which contain obvious sales talks. They listen to the advertisement with amusement. My son often asks concerning

some food or other product, “Does it say that in *Consumer's Research*?” We have even discussed good versus bad programs. I feel radio programs for children are cheap and so are funnies, but it is a tolerable cheapness.

I do not understand how there is any argument about the radio in the child's life. It is a modern household appliance, almost a necessity and, like electricity and the automobile, should be used with discretion. The radio is a pleasant informal means of becoming familiar with the great musical masters; it opens conversations on politics and news items. As a means of teaching human understanding and geography, what could be more thrilling than tuning in on Paris, London, Rome? To our children the radio is one of the marvelous scientific inventions of the times. My five-year-old is more interested in how it works than in the programs and when it is out of commission its charms are double. In fact, the radio mechanic is his ideal.

I do not forbid tuning in on even the less desirable programs unless it is at a time that disturbs. Our children are always so busy that the radio is certainly not stressed; and if it is occasionally used for relaxation, what is wrong in doing so? Children cannot have adult tastes twenty-four hours a day. We do not expect it in other ways; why in this case?

Why not begin by asking what it is that gives children so much satisfaction in some of the radio programs disapproved by their elders and betters? Perhaps in these overprotected days the young Indian in most boys and girls has nothing else half so satisfying to which to turn for some deep inner craving. It is a phase which, other things being equal, they will grow thru and beyond.

When the radio becomes a serious problem in family discipline, why blame it? The trouble in such a case is likely to be deeply rooted in the home situation, and the radio just sets a match to the tinder.

The radio is not at fault if it is an outlet for something which is fundamentally wrong between the parent and the child.

As was pointed out in introducing it, there are no general conclusions to be drawn from such a comparatively small and deliberately informal inquiry as this. It serves first to suggest certain patterns that children at certain ages do seem to follow in their radio interests, and second to indicate how their parents regard these. There appears much fair-minded criticism and a desire to utilize the radio for the enrichment of home living—and this self-evident point of view is in itself a significant “finding.”

THE RADIO SET OWNER who prefers good programs uninterrupted with sales talks is another of those who “don't know which way to turn.”—Editorial, *Christian Science Monitor*, January 13, 1933.

*Petition to those people responsible for the production of the radio skit called “Orphan Annie”:*

We, the undersigned, as members and friends of the *Minneapolis College Women's Club*, a branch of the *American Association of University Women*, wishing to uphold the best standards of education for the nation's children, do vigorously protest the present character of the radio program called *Orphan Annie* broadcast especially for children in the advertising of children's foods.

A survey made by the preschool group of the *College Women's Club*, members of which are especially interested in the physical and mental influences surrounding the growing child, has revealed an overwhelming majority of mothers of children from every walk of life protesting against this program and confirming our convictions that:

[1] The character of this program is not only widely at variance with the normal and ideal life for the average young child, but is indeed so cheaply melodramatic as to inculcate in the listening child a taste for the poorest in literature and life, and an unnatural desire for over-stimulation and thrill;

[2] That this continual and unnecessary over-stimulation is an actual physical and mental detriment to the normal functioning of the child's emotions of fear, anger, and loyalty;

[3] The reflection of this over-stimulation in nervous, frightened children, with strident voices and objectional vocabularies is actually antagonizing the parents to the extent that the value of the program as an advertising medium is entirely lost;

[4] That now when all forward-looking people realize that the control of crime is one of our country's greatest problems, we should not allow a generation of children to be drilled in all the technic and realities of every sort of crime, which are in fact being injected into this program so vividly. This so-called daily entertainment is tearing down faster than can be built up in children the ideals and standards of right living.

Having audited this survey and presented its findings to our general education section, this group and its friends wish to record its protest against such programs being broadcast, and to petition you to [1] either remove the objectionable features of this program, *i. e.*, the overdrawn dramatic crime episodes, the raucous, unnatural voices of the actors, and the coarse vocabulary; or better still, to [2] substitute therefor programs to stimulate children's imaginations in the right direction, such programs to be chosen or sponsored by children's libraries from our unlimited store of *good* literature, and to be told or dramatized by persons trained to convey to the observant child the worth of good drama, told in good language, thru the medium of good voices speaking correctly.

[An identical petition was drawn up concerning the *Skippy* program.]

# Advantages of State Radio

THE STATE OF WISCONSIN is most fortunate in having its own radio facilities capable of reaching practically every citizen in the state.

No other state in the Union is so well-equipped as Wisconsin is now to serve its people thru the medium of radio communication. It is quite fitting that Wisconsin, the birthplace of WHA, the world's oldest educational broadcasting station, should take this position of leadership in the development of state-owned radio facilities.

Properly used, the two radio stations owned and operated by the state can serve the people effectively and efficiently:

[1] By extending free to the people the educational advantages of the normal schools, colleges, and university.

[2] By reporting daily the findings of agricultural workers for the improvement of farm conditions.

[3] By extending the work of service agencies such as the State Board of Health.

[4] By keeping open the lines of direct communication between the people and the government officials in whom they have placed their trust.

Other states are watching with interest the development of Wisconsin's pioneering projects in radio.

I am told that just this week the educational director for the midwest division of the NBC was here to observe the workings of the Wisconsin School of the Air. This great leader had high praise for the work done here and declared it far superior to other similar educational projects.

Wisconsin has pioneered also by being the first state to make use of its own broadcasting facilities in an election campaign—and this fact was reported by the *New York Times*, the *U. S. Daily*, and numerous other newspapers and magazines thruout the country. Time on the air over both stations WHA and WLBL was given free of charge to all parties and candidates. This time, if purchased at commercial rates, would have cost more than \$10,000.

I understand that thousands of dollars of the taxpayers' money have been saved by utilizing *without cost* the services of university electrical engineers in the construction of equipment. In one instance, by especially designing and building the new WHA transmitter instead of purchasing it from the Radio Corporation or Western Electric Company, the committee in charge saved \$13,250. It is, of course, our purpose to keep alert to the possibilities for further economies in view of the

distressing times. On the whole, however, radio provides a very efficient and economical means for serving vast numbers of people where, before, comparatively few could be reached at one time.—Albert G. Schmedeman, governor, State of Wisconsin.

## British Approve Present Radio

THE HOUSE OF COMMONS made it clear, after a three-hour debate tonight, that it would allow neither advertising nor political interference in British radio programs.

Proposals to place the British Broadcasting Corporation under Parliamentary control were decisively rejected, and a motion by Laborites that a committee recommend changes in the existing system met a similar fate. The House registered the emphatic belief that Britain's noncommercial, state-owned broadcasting system was functioning well and should be left alone.

The debate, the first of its kind since 1926, was precipitated by an incident on New Year's Eve, when an announcer criticized Poland and involved the broadcasting corporation in international difficulties. Criticisms of favoritism also have been coming from Left-Wing Laborites, Right-Wing Tories, and other political groups, which allege they are not getting a fair share of the programs. The postmaster-general assured the complainers that controversial opinions were welcomed in the British programs, except opinions which were blasphemous or openly seditious.

David Lloyd George charged that British newspapers were growing so biased and unfair in their news columns that independent radio programs were the last refuge of healthy political thought in England.

"Very few speeches are reported in Britain nowadays," he said, "and we have a condition of things where headlines are creating opinion. I don't say there is suppression of news, but there is emphasis of the particular kind of news which favors the opinion of the particular newspaper."

"Opinions are thus created not by editorials but by the way the news is arranged and displayed. Certain news is elaborated, while other news is put somewhere in the backyard. I don't know any other agency whereby we can, under the present conditions, present the vast issues upon which the country's life depends except the British Broadcasting Corporation."—Dispatch from London in *The New York Times*, February 23, 1933.

EDUCATION BY RADIO is published by the National Committee on Education by Radio at 1201 Sixteenth Street, Northwest, Washington, D. C. The members of this Committee and the national groups with which they are associated are as follows:

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