

YMA 50th Birthday seminar and celebration
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Response to Patricia Edgar's Challenge

I am proud to help celebrate this important milestone for YMA. I have been associated with YMA for many years, and always been impressed by its capacity to identify emerging problems and new issues, its energetic and effective lobbying and advocacy, and its education and support to parents and others.

I am also delighted to say a few words in response to Patricia Edgar's 'challenge' – and what a challenge! So much of what she had to say I agree with whole-heartedly, and won't reiterate.

Let me start by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and paying my respects – we have reminders of their continuing presence and connection to the land around here in the Ian Potter Gallery next door, and Birrarung Marr just outside.

The problems of children's health, development and wellbeing are complex and intertwined. We live in a wealthy society, but almost all indicators of children's wellbeing are either getting worse or problems are remaining at unacceptably high levels - these include obesity, diabetes, substance use, child and youth depression, suicide, school drop-out, and antisocial behaviour, among others. At the same time, the inequalities in children's wellbeing appear to be getting stronger - those in well-educated high-income families have fewer problems, those in more disadvantaged families have more problems, and of course Aboriginal children and young people in particular are facing multiple challenges.

These issues, along with the increasingly recognized importance of the early years of life, were the impetus for the creation of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), with whom I now work. It resulted from researchers and practitioners getting together and saying 'we have to do something about this, and we can only do it by working together better'. Headed by Professor Fiona Stanley, ARACY is now a national alliance of about 300 organisations (including YMA) and 800 individuals. Researchers from multiple disciplines and those from policy and practice sectors, are together trying to make a difference. After all, to have a healthy, educated, engaged, well-adjusted and happy next generation is of significance to us 'oldies' as we age, as well as being a right to which young people are themselves entitled. And in working towards this goal, the adage that 'an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure' is very relevant.

I'd like to say a few words from my perspective as a researcher.

My own research in this area started in the early 1990s, when we first saw the phenomenon of children's programs acting as free advertisements for merchandise. We were particularly concerned about violence and aggression at this time. Our research showed that pairing of violent TV cartoons with their associated aggression-laden toys (ie kids watched the cartoon and then played with the toys) resulted in preschool aged kids showing more aggression when they were subsequently in a free play situation with other kids – more than if they just watched the cartoon and played with

'benign' toys, or if they played with the aggressive toys but did not watch the violent cartoon¹. So it showed that active rehearsal of the violent material that the kids had seen in the cartoons, by playing with the associated toys, made the violence more salient and more likely to be enacted and generalized in peer play.

We are now living in a much more complex media environment than in the early 1990s – kids are growing up in an increasingly media-saturated world, and every step along with way creates more opportunities but also more concerns. The case for the impact of media violence on children's attitudes and behaviour is now just about settled, and we have a good understanding of how its influence happens and the conditions under which it happens, which as Patricia observed, can be complex. These include imitation, observational learning, desensitisation, identification with characters, and formation of cognitive scripts. But it remains a problem, as does the pairing of media content of whatever sort with merchandise - the marketisation of children's media, the advertisements and inducements to consume, to define yourself on materialistic grounds (especially in an era when we know that every consumer 'good' purchased involves energy expenditure, and that energy expenditure is directly linked to climate change) is a critical issue.

The media *does* have potential to support children's health and development – we all know the evidence for this coming from research on Sesame Street and the other rare examples of good quality children's programming. But does it *usually* have a beneficial effect? Recent data from 5000 4-5 year olds in *Growing Up in Australia* (the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children which is following 10,000 children across Australia forward over time) indicates that, as previously, extensive TV exposure is *not* helpful..

Growing Up in Australia is a broadly based study, covering all aspects of children's development and all contexts of their lives. It includes some questions on media. Most 4-5 year olds watch 1-3 hours of TV a day, but 20% watch more than this. We found a clear gradient between the amount of TV children watched and an index of preschool children's wellbeing which incorporated physical health and development, social and emotional adjustment and learning. Those watching more TV (3 or more hours a day) were more likely to have low scores on this index, and fewer of them had high scores. This relationship held even after we took into account lots of other family characteristics like parent education, family income, family structure etc.² Those watching more TV were also more likely to be overweight or obese.

By contrast, things like being read to by a family member - learning-oriented family activities -were strongly associated with better outcomes for children, even at this young age. They were more ready for school, had better early literacy skills etc. So extensive TV exposure, with our current programming, was *not* a positive influence in their lives, and seemed to displace more beneficial activities. And this is at preschool age – when they've only had a few years of TV exposure

We'll be gathering more detailed information on media use in later waves of the study, which should be a useful data source for those interested in documenting and understanding these effects. There is a clear need for further research. But although I am a researcher, I say let's not wait for these or any other data – we already have plenty of evidence about critical issues. Today we've received a clarion call for renewed action. It seems everyone is passing the buck and protecting their own interests –

¹ **Sanson A** & Di Muccio C. (1993). The influence of aggressive and neutral cartoons and toys on the behaviour of preschool children. *Australian Psychologist*. 28:93-99.

² Wake, M., **Sanson A**, Berthelsen, D., Hardy, P., Misson, S., Smith, K. & Ungerer, J. (In press). How well are Australian infants and children aged 4 to 5 doing? The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children Wave 1 Thematic Publication. Canberra, Australia: FACSIA.

the industry, advertisers, government, etc. We need to be active, impassioned, proactive, and coordinated in our efforts, engaging with these stakeholders, finding ways forward. I have no doubt YMA will continue to be a central force in bringing concerns to the forefront, and harnessing our energies and expertise, in advocating for an improved media environment our children and young people grow up in, and hence protecting and enhancing their wellbeing.

Thanks and here's to the next 50 years!