

Dr Catherine Marraffa – Address for YMA 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday

On behalf of Professor Neil Wigg, president Division of Paediatrics and Child Health, Royal Australasian College of Physicians, I wish a very happy 50<sup>th</sup> birthday to Young Media Australia. Looking at the early children's television programs in the introduction today brought back memories that were very powerful. I had forgotten about "Adventure Island" but I was instantly transported back to when we got our first television when I was 12 years old.

Though Jane Roberts admitted she is about the same age as YMA, I am a little older than YMA but very grateful that a group of caring, child focused individuals made a decision 50 years ago that children needed high quality educational and enjoyable television programs and films. They were certainly ahead of their time.

Young Media Australia has been enormously helpful in getting our College to see that it has a vital role in educating parents and advocating on behalf of children about the use of the media and its effects on children and their development.

A few years ago Jane contributed and helped the College to come up with a media policy, dragging us into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This policy has been reprinted a number of times and this is testimony to its usefulness for our members.

My own work is with children with developmental disabilities including physical and intellectual disabilities such as autism, spina bifida and cerebral palsy.

The range of media technologies and uses, can be highly beneficial in this population. Yet it always makes me very concerned when a parent tells me proudly that their 18 month old knows how to use all the remote controls and can program a video recorder, particularly when the problem they are seeing me for is language and communication difficulties. When they ask my advice about what are the best and most educational computer programs or television programs to help their child's development, I say "put the remotes high up and out of the way and get down on the floor and play with your child. Have a tea party; help them put the dolly to bed. Talk to them and interact with them help them to use their imagination."

You do not need expensive computers, I Pods or big screen televisions.

This is particularly important in the first few years of life. Play is how children learn communication, symbolism and the meaning of language. Reading to your child is not negotiable. Last night when I was thinking about what I would say today I was trying to remember in which children's story, Roald Dahl had written his memorable tirade about the evils of television. I asked my daughter who knew it was the Oompaloompas who had sung this to Charlie and Grandpa Joe. It is hard to believe this was written back in 1961 but it is as important a message today as it was then.

I would love to read all of it to you but I don't have time so I shall read a part of it.

"Oh yes we know it keeps them still  
They don't climb out the window sill  
They never fight or kick or punch  
They leave you free to cook the lunch  
And wash the dishes in the sink  
But did you ever stop to think  
To wonder just exactly what  
This does to your beloved tot  
It rots the senses in the head  
It kills imagination dead  
It clogs and clutters up the mind  
It makes a child so dull and blind  
He can no longer understand  
A fantasy, a fairyland  
His brain becomes as soft as cheese  
His powers of thinking rust and freeze  
He cannot think he only sees  
Alright you'll cry. Alright you'll say

But what if we take the set away  
What shall we do to entertain  
Our darling children please explain.....”

And so on, we hope that the effects of television have not been as dire as Dahl predicted but we all need to take heed and continue to ensure our privileged position as guides and advocates for our precious children makes the media the best it possibly can be.

We are grateful for the opportunity to share in this celebration and here's to the next 50 years.  
Thank you.

Dr Catherine Marraffa