

Student Essay:

The Simpsons: Simply Bad For Children?

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The most influential years of a child's life are between the ages of one and eight. The environment they are raised in is important in determining how their minds and bodies will function. A plant placed in a sunny plot of soil, rich in nutrients and moisture, will grow and prosper. However, the same plant grown in a poor medium may grow weak, off-coloured or crooked. Growing children are affected similarly by the family the live with the friends they choose, the schools they attend, the books they read and the television shows they watch. Of the many popular television shows available to aspiring young couch potatoes *The Simpsons* is one of the most popular. Unfortunately, *The Simpsons* is like a poor plot of soil. It does not nourish. *The Simpsons* is a very detrimentally influential show and should not be watched by children, especially under the age of eight, because they have are intellectually immature and because they can be influenced by the show's negative material.

Children are ill-prepared to handle the mature subject matter on *The Simpsons* because of their limited cognitive abilities. It is cognition that gives us the ability to learn, judge, reason, imagine, perceive, think and memorize. In our youth we are like a blank slate, developing from a stage of almost complete ignorance. Initial development is achieved through a two-step process known as learned behaviour. Learned behaviour translated into everyday terms means "Monkey see, Monkey do".

The first step of the learned behaviour process involves absorbing the world through the senses. All of the senses, hearing, touching, feeling, tasting and seeing, are used to receive information. Everyday at 5:00 pm children watch *The Simpsons*, and everyday they hear a new twist to the same old tune. Rude and suggestive comments like, "Don't have a cow man" and 'Look at the nerd, learning

outside of school'', fill their ears. Dangerous and violent acts, such as characters attempting to jump a canyon on a skateboard or the careless treatment of hazardous materials at a nuclear power plant, occupy their eyes. These images become a part of the child's sensory world.

The second part of the learned behaviour process involves the processing of what has been received. Past experiences affect how one acts today and five years from now. In many cases the vulgarity absorbed between 5:00 and 5:30 pm can be seen in a child's behaviour that very night. I recall, more than once, at the dinner table my

To illustrate, imagine a scene showing Homer choke Bart. Bart walks away unharmed and nothing is done about Homer's actions. In reality this would not happen. A human would be hurt physically and mentally by such an action and Homer would probably be charged with child abuse. On *The Simpsons*, dangerous acts and serious injuries occur without lasting effects. The children never witness the long term pain and complications that coincide with these actions in real life. The incidents are treated as though they never happened and all is fixed and forgotten within a few minutes. Children do what they see. When children perform a dangerous or careless

The negative presentation of material on *The Simpsons* is not suitable for children. What a child perceives and hears is not always what is implied. The senses, of touching, tasting, seeing, hearing, and smelling, mature very fast, so fast that the slowly developing mind can not process everything the senses bring in. Children will often look but not see; listen but not hear. They can not assimilate the show's underlying messages. Sexual acts are overlooked, political puns are missed, and double talk means nothing. Most cartoons attempt to teach the difference between right and wrong. *The Simpsons* presents the idea of right and wrong in a way backwards to the conceptual method of teaching right by showing right. The writers attend to teach this concept by showing negative consequences for negative actions. For example, in one episode, Lisa is shown upset when Bart forgets her birthday. Bart is then scolded by his angry mother, Marge. The idea of avoiding hurt feelings and angry voices by not forgetting a birthday is taught to children. Would it not be better to have a child wish to remember a birthday after seeing the joy one receives when a birthday is remembered? If children repeat what they have observed have trouble relating cause with effect, and do not understand subtle messages, then what chance is there that the negative-negative model will be understood and converted to a positive-positive one before being repeated. It is more likely that they will hear negative, see negative, and do negative.

For the reasons outlined, *The Simpsons* has been in and out of controversy for as long as the show has been around. Parents have had enough and are trying to shield their children by having the show banned. However, these attempts have been met with limited success and there is little chance the show will ever be forced off the air. Perhaps it is time parents took responsibility, laid down some rules, and did not allow their children, especially under the age of eight, to watch *The Simpsons*.

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father stating "Straight from the mouth of Bart Simpson" after I had just finished watching *The Simpsons*. Observed repeatedly, suggestive comments, rudeness and violence are imprinted in a child's thoughts and are bound to resurface gradually over the weeks, months and years.

A child's ability to reason is very underdeveloped under the age of eight. He or she ignores logic and judgement in response to everyday decisions. Violent and destructive acts are not connected with pain and damage, and in the same way, rude and insensitive comments are not linked with hurt feelings. It is this inability to link cause and effect, mixed with controversial ideas and actions, that can create problems.

act, they do not intend it to be dangerous or careless because they do not see their actions as causing lasting pain or damage.

For a child's restricted cognitive abilities distinguishing the difference between reality and unreality is a chore. This chore is further complicated when cartoons like *The Simpsons* become a part of the medium influencing a child's mental development. The Simpsons add to the problem because the physical and social presentation of the characters and the town resemble those of the real world. For this reason, absurd and irregular events, such as large robotic insects destroying a school, may distort a child's view of what is real and what is possible.

