Radio and the Child

By Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg

LOOKING backward, radio appears as but the latest of cultural emergents to invade the putative privacy of the home. Each such invasion finds the parents unprepared, frightened, resentful, and helpless. Within comparatively short memory, the "movie," the automobile, the telephone, the sensational newspaper or magazine, the "funnies," and the cheap paper-back book have had similar effects upon the apprehensions and solicitudes of parents.

A new instrument or medium always brings difficulties that cannot be solved on the basis of earlier experiences or earlier criteria of conduct. Many literary masterpieces, such as Mark Twain's classics of child life, at first aroused the hostility of adults, only to become "required reading" in the public schools. Similarly, the "movies" brought protests that made no discriminations among the crude slapsticks, the impossible "Westerns," and the new creations of Charlie Chaplin. It took time to reveal that some of the performances which were at first offensive to parents were not only better adapted to children's tastes and needs, but also psychologically and educationally more sound than those which parents preferred.

To point out that we have gradually assimilated these other "invaders," and to expect, therefore, that we shall before long find for the radio its proper place, is not to belittle either the validity of the parental anxieties or the dangers of the instrument itself as a potential agent for harm; nor is it to minimize the difficulties it presents. The parallel is intended merely to suggest that some perspective may be helpful in considering the problem of the radio and the child. We must not overlook, however, the important fact that in some respects the radio finds the parents more helpless than the "movies" or the "funnies"; for no locks will keep this intruder out, nor can parents shut their children away from it.

The Facts in the Case

No comprehensive research has been undertaken in the field of radio for children comparable to the Payne Fund Study of motion pictures. Yet parents' organizations in many kinds of communities and in every part of the country have been recording the types of programs their children prefer, the amount of time they give to listening, the seeming effects upon the children, and their own feelings, as parents, regarding these programs.

From these rather informal studies we now know that a very large proportion of children between the ages of six and thirteen devote an imposing total of hours to the radio. There is evidence of a sustained interest from the age of six on, rising to a peak at about ten to twelve years. In samples checked up, forty children out of a hundred listen in for half an hour or more daily, following certain programs with passionate interest. About twelve or thirteen in a hundred are reported to be radio "fans," although this classification depends more upon the mother's point of view than upon the total amount of time that the child spends with the radio; for many children not so classified actually give

more time to listening than do those called "fans."

Children preponderantly show enthusiasm for a kind of program which parents as a whole view unfavorably with about the same unanimity. The thriller, the mystery, comedy (not so high), the melodramatic adventure series—all these are seized on by the children with an avidity that leaves the parents aghast. Finally, there is no carry-over of likes and dislikes from parents to their children. This we should perhaps have known from common observation, although parents generally are inclined to assume that their own tastes and discernments are assimilated by their children early in life.

The specific problems of the radio are those that have to do, on the one hand, with the home—adjusting time, choice of program, mutual consideration among the members of the family, conflict with other activities; and on the other hand, with the quality and character of the broadcasting as it affects the growing personalities of eventual citizens.

As to Domestic Relations

When several pairs of ears are eager to enjoy one radio at any given time, there is always the possibility of conflict. Yet, as between the children themselves, much less is reported than we might have expected, and apparently less than was common when the radio was still a novelty and the struggle was for each to get to it ahead of the others. Indeed, many parents report that the radio establishes a bond of common interest, and a quarter of the mothers questioned think that it actually prevents quarrels and "gives children of different ages a pleasure which they can happily share."

When the interests of children and adults clash, the decision as to the program to be tuned in must be determined either by compromise or by fiat. The music or the political talk that older members of the family prefer has to be accepted or ignored by the children, or it has to give way out of consideration for the children's preferences. The choice between the children's demand for radio at breakfast and the father's desire to read his newspaper in peace may have to be decided arbitrarily in favor of the father. But in each case the parents must be aware of just what is involved in the issue.

As a matter of fact, the radio seems to cause less conflict between children and adults than it did some years ago, although children do often resent adult supervision and restrictions in their free choice of programs. One mother also spoke of her six-year-old's resentment against the radio as an adult preoccupation which deprived her of the companionship of adults. "She cried bitterly during the President's address."

Related to questions of parental judgment are the strains reported in many cases as resulting from the efforts of adults to regulate the child's use of the radio by arbitrary rules. "I ordered my twelve-year-old boy not to turn the radio on before dinner, but I found that he had been listening to the radio and shutting it off just before I got home." This suggests, however, that in many homes the radio is not itself the problem it appears to be, but merely the precipitant for deep-seated tensions in the family situation. In this case, for example, we cannot suppose that the boy's disregard of his mother's wishes was confined to the radio.

The most serious and most common complaint against the radio as part of the home equipment is its frequent interference with other interests and activities. Family conversation is the

greatest sufferer, with reading and music practice close seconds. The other losses mentioned are group games, creative play, crafts, singing, and so on. This is perhaps a competition which we must learn to accept as legitimate—and as a challenge to the more time-honored activities to justify their continuance as family diversions.

The intruder is not, however, uniformly condemned. Not only does the radio often serve to unify the members of the family by furnishing a variety of common experiences, but it sometimes furthers the parents' purposes. Thus, one family feels that the radio "is valuable as an adjunct to the education and entertainment of the household." Another parent writes, "I feel that my children's great interest in music has been encouraged by radio. . . . With so much to choose from, they can afford to be discriminating."

These and other examples suggest that the problem of managing the radio in the home is part of the larger problem of living together in a household made up of individuals of different ages and tastes. Many parents are aware that setting up rules designed to work automatically and permanently is less constructive than the continuous need for working *with* children. Thus one writes, "It takes some guiding to keep from adding too many programs and so curtailing reading, outdoors, and social contacts. But appeal of reason has so far worked and the balance has been maintained. Hence the influence to date has been positive rather than negative."

THE PROGRAM ITSELF

The most vociferous complaints about the radio have come from parents and teachers and ministers who have raised questions as to the merits of the programs to which children are exposed, and as to the probable effects upon the minds and characters of the listeners. A particularly excited mother brings all the objections together in one sweep:

> Many of us with children from seven on are perfectly frantic over the effect of the radio on children. The programs are sensational nonsense and children are made nervous and develop fears they never had before—fear of the dark, fear of gruff voices. One mother says her children have developed a feeling of evil in the world.

It is not easy to distinguish clearly between what parents think of the quality of a particular broadcast, and what they think of the effects of radio in general upon their children. A mother who dislikes a certain program is quite sure that it is bad for her child; but when we ask her what is objectionable about it, she tells us in effect that it is objectionable because she does not like it.

At one meeting somebody criticized "Buck Rogers." One of the boys present asked, "What's the matter with 'Buck Rogers'?" A teacher observed that the narratives were "inaccurate." But what is the meaning of "inaccurate" in connection with an imaginary projection into the twenty-fifth century? What harm has come to the past generation from reading the inaccuracies of Jules Verne or the romances of H. G. Wells?

Neither adults nor children can convey clearly and convincingly the "reasons" for their preferences or dislikes, and when challenged, both will try to justify their tastes on the basis of generally accepted principles. It is beyond dispute, however, that many of the programs are objectionable because they convey false ideals or misleading sentimentalities, or because they "murder the King's English" or play too recklessly with elemental fears and horrors. In their admonitions and

exhortations, offered ostensibly to help parents in the training of their children, many are too crude and psychologically unsound. Parents may rightfully object to the kind of advice sometimes offered children on the management of their problems and on the conduct of life generally. And no excuse can be found for impressing children with their obligation to promote the sales of the merchandise advertised by the sponsors of the programs which they like.

The worries of parents in regard to radio are serious, and their grievances for the most part warranted; but there is so much of the hysterical among the criticisms that we have to be particularly careful to envisage the situation in its entirety.

SOMETHING NEEDS TO BE DONE

In considering possible lines of action, we must in the first place eliminate all disputations as to taste, since it was discovered some centuries ago that such disputations lead nowhere. A current example of this truism is the preference expressed by a father who comments on his personal experiences and observations in a recent magazine article.[1] He feels that Baby Rose Marie warbling "adult hotsy-totsy songs" is preferable to adventure programs, since "at least there was no life-risking predicament with which to drag the listener to the loud-speaker for the next broadcast." There are many equally qualified adults—psychologists and parents, to say nothing of music lovers—who would question his assurance that the new program is better for children than its predecessor. It is a telling commentary on our adult confusion on this whole question of taste when we offer children only such sorry alternatives.

[1] Mann, Arthur, "Children's Crime Programs: 1934," *Scribner's Magazine*, Oct. 1934.

A second fundamental consideration is the fact that the differences between the preferences of adults and those of children are in large part due to differences in maturity. Children have to grow into finer discriminations, and they have to be helped; but not by privations and preachments—and not by having to choose between Baby Rose Marie and crime adventures.

In the third place, we have to ask ourselves what it is that gives children so much satisfaction in some of the things most disapproved by their elders, and so common in the radio programs. From wide and intensive psychological studies, as well as from the insight of competent observers, we are coming to recognize that the exciting adventures, and even the terrifying episodes, which leave children trembling and yet demanding more, satisfy something corresponding to the child's stage of development, to his personal or temperamental make-up, or to the gaps in his experience. Like reading itself, which we value and encourage, like the best in drama, these disapproved excitements are forms of vicarious adventure, substitute expansions of experience that fulfill an inner need which the child can neither express nor disregard. In extreme cases of excessive addiction to the radio or to particular types of programs, the parents may well consider the child's behavior as symptomatic of a condition that may need closer and more discerning study, rather than harsher penalties and restrictions.

The individual differences in the unconscious demands of children are illustrated by two boys, of eight and five years, in an intellectual and pacifist home. They had been taken to see the sound film "Treasure Island," and were asked what they liked best in the picture. The older boy, in a dreamy voice, said, "I loved the way the ships

pulled out, when it was getting dark, and the clouds." The younger boy, with an angel face, said, "I liked the shooting best. Oh, boy, oh, boy! Was that some shooting!"

However satisfactory the first, or shocking the second reaction may seem to adults, they can draw from them no conclusions whatever as to either the personalities into which these children are to grow, or the background in which they are developing. They can be confident only that the experience was for both children of genuine value.

In the most extensive study yet made of children's reactions to radio,[2] the outspoken statements of children themselves indicate a deep appreciation of the thrills, the fascinations exercised by some of the broadcasts. In children's written descriptions of "The Radio Program I Like Best," secured for this study, typical favorites are reproduced with bated breath.

Here is what one boy says of "Buck Rogers":

> There is silence on the air. Suddenly we hear the sound of rocket motors and a voice says, "Buck Rogers in the Twenty-fifth Century." . . . [Buck sees] things that weren't dreamed of in the twentieth century such as rocket ships, disintegrators, paralysis guns, rocket pistols, thermic radiation projectors and many others. I like "Buck Rogers" best because it is the most exciting, breathe-taking and fast-moving radio program on the air.

Another says: "The program I like best is 'Skippy.' It is a venture's drama. I sit like in a daze on my chair near the radio and listen to this wonderful thrill."

Even those who choose more serious programs seem to have an eye—or rather an ear—mainly for the thrills. One girl, for instance, selects "Twenty Thousand Years in Sing-Sing," "because," as she says, "it is not at all silly, and because it is quite mysterious. Also I like it because it tells of the experiences of people, that when stealing are caught and brought to prison. In that way it helps me not to do such things." One cannot forbear pointing out how this child unconsciously rationalizes her interest in the sensational, and throws in a moralistic comment as a sop to adult standards.

CENSORSHIP

There can be no question, then, as to the needs of children for a great variety of substitute experiences and adventures; and these needs cannot be ignored in any concerted efforts to improve the radio fare offered children. For when groups of parents, having become self-conscious and indignant, undertake to "clean up" matters by using their united powers in an attack on the radio or on special programs of which they disapprove, there is grave danger of defeating their own ends. Such drives are just as objectionable as the thing they are intended to remedy; for the imposition upon the public of a hard-and-fast partisan or other special view or preference is hardly an improvement upon the present situation which these very groups so deeply deplore. We gain nothing from such a censorship by any group that has the power to exert special pressure. The negative approach is in the long run unproductive, although it is understandable as a manifestation of outraged feelings.

To be sure, broadcasters and advertisers have been compelled to take notice because of the many protests. They are perhaps particularly sensitive to criticism because, in a field so new that there are no established criteria, the producers are naturally just as be-

[2] Eisenberg, I. L., *Children's Preferences and Reactions in Radio Programs.* A study for a doctor's dissertation. Teachers College, Columbia University, 1934.

wildered as the public, and are groping just as blindly for improvement. Moreover, the broadcasting companies make the counter complaint that alarm is always more articulate than approval. When parents disapprove, they become very vocal. But, so the broadcasters report, if they occasionally remove a feature that has been generally understood to be acceptable to parents, its disappearance from the air causes not a ripple of visible regret.

TOWARD CONSTRUCTIVE MEASURES

Positive efforts are likely to be more effective, if they extend only to the replacing of "black lists" with "white lists."

On the initiative of the American Library Association there was formed early in 1933 a joint committee representing that organization, the Progressive Education Association, and the Child Study Association, with the writer as chairman, to work out possible methods of coöperation.

After considering various plans, the committee believes that the establishment of a central clearing house would best serve this purpose. Such a central agency would act as a *liaison* between the interested public, as represented by parents' groups, educational organizations, and others concerned with furthering child welfare and education, and the commercial interests, including the broadcasting companies, the advertising agencies, and the program sponsors. The chief functions of such a clearing house would be: to evaluate what we now know about children's radio programs and make this information available; to set in motion inquiries and researches for the study of questions which are yet unanswered, and such additional questions as are bound to arise; and finally, to develop and sponsor experimental programs built on the very best available knowledge and presented with as much skill as possible.

The committee believes that it is not a question of some of us telling the rest what should be done; it is a question of all who care giving their thought, their insight, and their sympathy.

We have in the past century brought the public school system in America to the point where we are able to carry it forward in spite of great divergence of views as to what it should try to do and how it should perform its services. Boards of lay people, representing essentially the parents, working with an increasing number and variety of experts, are steadily developing an education that approximates the paradox of serving each and at the same time serving all. The community must learn to work together with the same flexibility in managing this new instrument for amusement, recreation, and a broader education.

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