

Take a look ‘through the windows’ at Play School

Jan Kingsbury, Lorraine Bayly and John Hamblin with Big Ted, 1980s
Photo: Australian Broadcasting Corporation



The much loved television program *Play School* has been produced and televised each weekday morning and afternoon by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) since 1966. *Play School* is a shared experience for many young Australian children and has earned intergenerational respect over its long history.

Although retaining many of the traditional program elements such as the personalised interaction style of the presenters, the use of the toys, the ‘through the windows’ film and ‘the clock’, *Play School* is also responsive to new directions in early childhood education and to the changing face of the Australian community. Early childhood educators gain many ideas for new songs, stories and games from the program to share with their diverse communities. Parents also report that, although they feel anxious about the content of many television programs for children, they feel it’s safe to trust their young children to the presenters of *Play School*. The production team at *Play School* has a longstanding commitment to excellence in programming for young children and this is reflected in the time spent in the production of each program. So how does *Play School* happen?

Each episode of *Play School* is designed to appear spontaneous and free flowing. The friendly interactions between the presenters and the child viewer, the use of the familiar toys, household and recycled objects in play and story telling, and the consistent elements of the ‘day of the week’, the useful box and ‘through the windows’ film contribute to the sense of warmth and familiarity for the child viewer. And while *Play School* may seem an

impromptu exploration of play and creative possibilities (by the two presenters), each individual program is the result of a long and thoughtful process.

The development of a *Play School* series involves the collaboration of an experienced team of professionals from different disciplines who come together to produce a program designed to entertain and empower young children, and to provide authentic representation of diversity and difference. This production team meets together to develop five programs which focus on the chosen theme. These overarching themes are selected for their interest to children and for their potential for play and exploration within the framework of the program.

The team involved in program planning includes the executive producer, producer, scriptwriters, an outliner (who is typically an early childhood educator with extensive experience working in the field), and an early childhood advisor who has knowledge of current research and contemporary early childhood perspectives. The theme selected for the week provides the focus for an initial brainstorming meeting during which members of the team contribute ideas and suggestions for the week of programs. At this stage the major input is provided by the outliner who contributes a broad selection of possible ideas, books and other resources. The other participants develop this further by suggesting additional possibilities for songs, stories, and experiences associated with the particular theme. An overview is then developed for the week – typically including the identification of sub-themes, stories and key experiences for each day.

A series of five meetings is then held for the development of a script, one meeting for each day of the week. The scriptwriter, in response, takes the outline of the day, and writes a draft script. Draft scripts are sent back and forth between the scriptwriter, advisor and producer over a number of weeks until a final script is ready for rehearsal. The development of the script is crucial to the personalised quality of the program. Although the dialogue may appear conversational and spontaneous in its final form, it is carefully scripted to be child friendly and to include encouragement for interaction from the audience. *Play School* seeks to involve the child in active participation during the



Humpty and Little Ted in a cubby house
Photo: Australian Broadcasting Corporation

program and to encourage and stimulate the exploration and enjoyment of the child's own world as a result of experience and ideas presented on the program' (*Play School*, 1999, p.2). Invitations such as 'you too' and the avoidance of personal pronouns 'I' and 'we' by the presenters, are conscious attempts to include the child viewer in what is happening within the program.

A half-day rehearsal with actors, musician, props designer, director, series producer and early childhood advisor is then held before each program is recorded. During rehearsal, further refinements are made to scripts, props, music and movement by the various members of the team. Although members of the community frequently offer their services as *Play School* presenters, all the presenters seen on *Play School* are professional actors who also demonstrate the ability to work with the child audience.

Segments such as the 'through the windows' film, and on occasion an animation, are inserted post-production. At the conclusion of the production phase, the early childhood advisor also prepares program notes giving details of the various elements included within the program, such as publication details of the stories and songs included, information about 'the makes' supported with visual images from the program, and 'ideas for later'.

Where to from here?

Many adults have fond memories of *Play School*, however it is more than that for many young children across the country. *Play School* continues to be an important aspect of each day's experience for young children in both urban and rural contexts around Australia. The unique place of *Play School* within the Australian community is reflected in an exhibition developed by the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, now touring regional areas of the country. This exhibition documents the history of the program and contains special features such as the much-loved toys, Jemima and Big Ted, and historical items such as the Flower Clock. However this exhibition may be a stronger reflection of *Play School's* past than its future.

In early December 2003 the ABC provided a showcase of new and continuing television programs for 2004. In the introduction to the program produced for the event, the

Director of Television commented, '2004 offers more diversity, more Australian content, more entertainment, more information programming - in fact more for EVERYONE on ABC TV'. For those who are interested in children's programs there seemed less on offer with very few listings of programs designed for children and the notable omission of *Play School*. As Amanda Meade reported in *The Australian* (2004), what has become an integral part of the early childhood experience for several generations of Australian children may not be retained into the future. Until this year the production team at *Play School* developed nine series (45 programs annually). In 2004 however, only two new series have been developed between January and April. While the program continues to be televised as frequently and no changes may be apparent to the audience, the number of staff allocated to the program and the number of new programs being developed has been drastically reduced. It is ironic that, at a time when the Federal Government is announcing a massive allocation of funds to improve provisions for children and families during the first five years of life, the national broadcaster appears less forthcoming about its commitment to this long running program for young children.

The ongoing commitment of ABC management to *Play School* is a reflection of the degree of importance placed on the youngest members of our community. The ABC claims to be 'everyone's ABC!' The strengths of *Play School* built over 38 years provide a strong foundation for ongoing production throughout 2004 and well into the future. However, the early childhood community: educators, carers, parents and grandparents, are encouraged to speak out for young children and support the children who love *Play School*. They should write, email, draw, and have their voices heard - all so that children's television will continue to be fostered and strengthened by the ABC.

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