

Watching what your kids watch on TV

Written by Freddie Allen Washington Correspondent NNPA News Service
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – When 6-year-old Simaya Hammonds ditched Dora the Explorer for tween-fare found on the Disney Channel and Nickelodeon, her mom, Tahneezia Hammonds wasn't surprised.

The precocious first grader enjoys "Shake It Up" on the Disney Channel and "Victorious," a show about students at a performing arts high school on Nickelodeon, is one of her favorites. "A.N.T. Farm," a show about a group of gifted middle schoolers (A.N.T. is an acronym for "Advanced Natural Talents) attending a local high school made it into her Disney rotation. Hammonds said she watches the shows with her daughter and offers running commentary such as when one of the "ANT's" gets bullied by one of the high school kids.

"We'll be watching a show and I'll say, 'That girls not very nice,' and she'll say, 'Yeah, I know,'" Hammonds recounted. Simaya watches one to two hours of television a day and her mother wonders if it's too much.

Simaya tunes in far less than her peers, according to a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation. Black children spend nearly six hours a day in front of the television, almost 50 percent more than white children (3.5 hours). The foundation study disclosed that 84 percent of Black youth ages 8-18 had televisions in their bedrooms and 78 percent said that the TV stays on during meals. Only 64 percent of white children reported having televisions in their bedrooms and only 58 percent watch while they eat.

"We can't deny the fact that media has an influence when [Black children] are spending most of their time – when they're not in school – with the television," said Nicole Martins, a telecommunications professor at Indiana University.

Martins and Kristen Harrison, a professor of communication studies at the University of Michigan, authored a study that looked at children's television viewing habits and self-esteem.

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The study, published in *Communication Research*, found that when children spend more time watching TV, they're self-esteem plummets. That was true for boys and girls of all races. The only group that seemed to benefit from more TV was young, white males.

When it comes to characters on TV, regardless of the show, if you're a white male, things in life are pretty good for you, Martins said in a statement. "You tend to be in positions of power, you have prestigious occupations, high education, glamorous houses, a beautiful wife, with very little portrayals of how hard you worked to get there," she added.

Bishetta Merritt associate professor and interim chair of the Radio, TV, and Film Department at Howard University, agrees.

"[White males] really have strong images," she explained.

White males showcase physical skills and courage on action-adventure shows and their intelligence and analytical skills on the CSI and NCIS franchises, Merritt said.

"When they shoot, they shoot straight and they can find a fingernail on the floor and figure out whose finger it belongs to," Merritt said. The Howard University professor lamented the scarcity of healthy role models for young women on a televised landscape overgrown with teenage moms, and trash-talking, bottle-throwing, celebrity ex-wives.

While roles for women are often one-dimensional and focused on their looks, Black males are often criminalized or seen as buffoons. According to Martins, this tells young Black boys that there's not a lot of good things to aspire to.

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“If we think about those kinds of messages, that’s what’s responsible for the impact,” Martins said.

The negative portrayal of Black men on television often has far-reaching consequences.

Research by Clifford Nass and Byron Reeves at Stanford University suggests that people often respond to others based on past cues they received from media because our interactions with computers, television, and new media have become more social and natural.

Thomas Ford, a former psychology professor, at Western Michigan University, found that whites are more likely to make negative judgments about Blacks they encounter in real life when they are exposed to negative stereotypes on television. Earlier research found that 50 percent of white children said that television is their primary source of information about Blacks.

So where are the positive Black role models on television? Surprisingly, commercials.

Black youth are exposed to more advertising than whites even when the amount of television they watch is factored in. The ads targeting Black children are often populated by Black athletes, musicians and celebrities and offer more positive images than what they see in the news or on prime time television shows.

The Yale University Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity reported that Black children and teens were exposed to at least 80 percent more ads than white children, and twice as many advertisements in 2010 for the 5-hour energy drink, Vitamin Water and Sprite.

“Our children are being assaulted by these drinks that are high in sugar and low in nutrition,” said Kelly Brownell, director of the Rudd Center at Yale. “The companies are marketing them in

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highly aggressive ways.”

This direct targeting has had a startling impact on the eating habits and health of Black children. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CD), 22.4 percent of Black children ages 6-17 were obese compared to 17.4 percent of white kids.

Recently, the Walt Disney Co. announced plans for stricter food advertising rules across all of its media platforms in an effort to curb the amount of high fat, high sugar ads children see during shows on its channels and Web sites.

The new standards are slated for the company’s 2015 programming.

“This is a significant advance by Disney,” Brownell said in an interview with USA Today. “With their reach and credibility, the tight nutrition standards they have set for specially designated foods will touch millions of children.”

To combat the influence and the negative impact of poor TV viewing habits, Merritt suggests that more parents follow Hammonds’ example by limiting the number of hours kids spend in front of the TV screen and actively engage in discussing what they’re watching.

“The parents should pick the shows that [their children] watch and talk to them about what they’re watching,” Merritt said. “You just can’t use [television] as the babysitter. Parents have to work hard, you have to channel all this energy that your children have into doing what you think is best for them.”