

# Quality Media for Kids

**Kids First! evaluators select age-appropriate programs and Web sites to help kids learn in the living room or the classroom.**

**I** OFTEN LISTEN TO PARENTS' AND TEACHERS' COMPLAINTS ABOUT the current state of television programming. It's true that, in our post-Superbowl 2004 media environment, walking the bridge between government intervention and freedom of speech has raised new concerns about programs shown during what we used to call "family hours." However, as an opponent of censorship, I'm always quick to point out that there are more tasteful programs than ever available on TV—thanks, in large part, to cable programmers. Through our Kids First! initiative, we at the Coalition for Quality Children's Media pay close attention to what's appropriate for different age groups and which programs are supported and enhanced by Web sites. The following are just some of the outstanding cable programs airing this summer that Kids First! recommends for kids—from preschoolers to high-schoolers. Comments were drawn from previous evaluations by Kids First! jurors plus new evaluations by child-development specialist, educator, and mom Chris Pollock; visual artist, media specialist, and writer Deborah Cool; six children ages 2 to 15; and me. I hope you enjoy them, and feel free to write us with your own suggestions.

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HI-5

## Picks for Middle- and High-School Kids

### Independence Day: The History of July 4th (The History Channel)

History comes alive in the story of one of America's most beloved holidays. This show takes the viewer on a journey through the history of America from pre-Revolution to the Emancipation Proclamation to women's rights issues to the troubled 1970s and right into the modern-day world. It ties America's history around the celebration of July 4th. The art is beautiful and helps sum up historical events. Clips can supplement history units from second grade through high school. Watching the show in its entirety would greatly benefit a high-school student, showing how all the American history lessons from

previous years are linked together. It is a true celebration of how cultural diversity is sculpted into national unity. Ages 7–18. **Also check out: *Nick News: Special Edition "The Legacy of Slavery"* (Nickelodeon).**

### Planet Twelve: The Secret Life of 12-Year-Olds (HBO Family)

This program takes you right into the heart of twelve-year-old existence. It chronicles a group of students during one week. The viewer becomes intimately involved with the lives of the students as the narrator explains the hierarchy of popularity and shows the likes and dislikes of the students. The show really helps the viewer identify with children this age. They run the gamut of emotions,

from love to loneliness to anger to rapture, all in one week. Young children watching this show will identify with the characters and get an understanding of other children in their grade. Parents and teachers would greatly benefit from this show by getting a glimpse of what their children are exposed to—peer pressure, talks of cutting themselves and suicide, and the struggle to fit in as they start to taste the freedom that comes with their age. The end of the episode shows the students two years later. Ages 10–14.

### Jazz Collection: Louis Armstrong (OVATION)

This wonderfully constructed biography shows how a boy from the poorest section of

## Picks for Preschoolers

### Dora the Explorer (Nickelodeon)

*Dora the Explorer* offers preschoolers a bilingual role model with a universal appeal. My friend's daughter has been quoting Dora's "Hola, amigos!" since she was about two years old! One out of every five children under the age of five in the U.S. comes from a Spanish-speaking family. But *Dora* doesn't appeal only to Latino kids—the audience bridges many cultures—and is the number-one-ranked animated character for the 2- to 5-year-old set. *Dora* is also an interactive program that encourages kids to play along, find their own answers, and feel like they're part of the show. Nickelodeon has received many deserved accolades for its groundbreaking efforts in creating one of the most highly researched shows on TV in *Dora* and, quite frankly, we can't say enough good things about it. If you haven't caught it yet, you're sure to be in for a great surprise. **Also check out:** *Blue's Clues* (Nickelodeon).

### HI-5 (TLC, Discovery Kids)

This highly interactive show, part of the Ready Set Learn program block on both TLC and Discovery Kids, is wonderful for preschool and

kindergarten children. The music is fun and upbeat, while the words and actions are simple and clear. In one episode, the five singers encourage children to make a tent, share spaces with friends, and discuss different forms of laughter. The cross-body choreography stimulates the right and left hemispheres of the brain. After watching a song about being a doctor, a child told me, "When I grow up, I want to be a doctor." The four-year-old sang and danced along with the show and, at the end, concluded with an enthusiastic, "I loved every part."

### Paz (TLC, Discovery Kids)

Preschool programming must balance its target audience's short attention span and limited vocabulary with their intently curious minds. Simple teeters precariously with boring, and calming struggles against stultifying. In *Paz*, which airs in eight-minute episodes at the top of each half hour in the Ready Set Learn block, animated graphics of bold colors and uncomplicated compositions blend well with soothing voices and gentle puppet characters. Verbal repetition helps the very young to learn words. Nothing is



Paz

jarring or excessive. Variety holds ever-shifting attention spans, and the show's skillful layering of puppets with graphics and stories within stories should work. Characters are kind and thoughtful to each other. These programs appeal best to those just old enough to follow basic story lines.

### On the Web

*Dora the Explorer* and *Blue's Clues* are supported by the Nick Jr. Web site, [www.nickjr.com](http://www.nickjr.com), which offers support for parents, activities for kids, printable downloads, and more. More on Ready Set Learn can be found at [tlc.discovery.com](http://tlc.discovery.com) and [discoverykids.com](http://discoverykids.com). *HI-5* information and materials can also be found at [ninemsn.com.au/kids/hi5](http://ninemsn.com.au/kids/hi5).

**Note: All programs scheduled to air in June, July, and/or August 2004. Check local listings for dates and times in your area.**

New Orleans grew up to become one of the most famous musicians in history. Archival film footage and interviews with his former wife give a detailed glimpse into the life of the man who "invented" jazz. From his talent on the

trumpet to the richness of his voice, Louis Armstrong shows the world that music is to be enjoyed. Music and history students will both benefit from watching this musical biography that covers prohibition and world wars. Ages 10–18. **Also check out:** *Biography* "Sir Isaac Newton: The Gravity of Genius" (A&E).

### Little Secrets (WAM!)

An aspiring violinist earns money by running a business where she listens to the secrets of others and doesn't tell. She has secrets of her own that she doesn't tell either. The secrets build up in her until she emotionally can't handle them, and her life starts falling apart. This movie has beautiful music

and a great cast. It moves along well and is not predictable. At the end, she reveals her secrets and encourages her "clients" to reveal theirs. This is a great movie to watch as a family or as a class. It shows the importance of communication in relationships. Ages 10–18.

### Switched "LaTanya/Lela" (ABC Family)

The concept behind ABC Family's *Switched* provides substantial food for thought. In this episode, nature-loving, white Lela trades her place at an outdoors-oriented boarding school in Colorado with African-American LaTanya's home in Los Angeles. The change is dramatic and these two 11th-graders and their friends



Little Secrets

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## Be Family Reviewers

You don't need to be a film or television critic to make good media decisions. Reviewing programs as a family can help you make good choices, think more critically about the programs you watch, and get your children's buy-in to limits on TV viewing. The seven questions below are a good framework for family reviews.

- 1 How well did you like this show? Give it a rating from 0 to 5, with 0 as "not at all" and 5 as "great."
- 2 Tell us what you liked best about the show. Be specific.
- 3 Tell us briefly what happened in the show, in 25 words or less.
- 4 What was your favorite part?
- 5 Who was the main character(s) and what did he or she do? Who is the actor playing the character(s)?
- 6 How would you describe the sets, music, and costumes?
- 7 What age group is the show most appropriate for? Be as broad as you can.

## Related Resources

### Cable in the Classroom Online: For Parents and Caregivers

[www.ciconline.org/Resources/ForParents](http://www.ciconline.org/Resources/ForParents)  
Programs and Web sites for different age groups and tips for parents to use them for active learning at home

### ControlYourTV.org

[www.controlyourtv.org](http://www.controlyourtv.org)  
Information on family-friendly programming, parental controls, and more, from Cable in the Classroom and the National Cable & Telecommunications Association

### Kids First!

[www.kidsfirst.org](http://www.kidsfirst.org)  
Media-education program from the Coalition for Quality Children's Media that teaches critical-viewing skills, evaluates and critiques media, and produces a traveling children's film festival

See Broadband Tools (pg. 9) and Summer Learning (pg. 4) for more resources.

## Picks for Middle- and High-School Kids continued



Switched

adapt with the kind of social ease some kids embody but are too young to define. Whole-some and well-spoken, the girls provide excellent role models by being themselves in obviously unscripted narration and clips. LaTanya's city-wise and talented friends ("we don't rap, we sing") don't miss a beat assimilating rugged Lela into the breezy shopping/fashion/music world of southern California. Likewise, hip, young LaTanya shoulders the rigors of the outdoors in dizzying outward-bound type exercises in the treetops with the support of Lela's classmates. Underneath a surface just glossy enough to keep young viewers' attention lies a message of self-confidence, tolerance, and cultural appreciation. Ages 9–15.

**Also check out:** *A Walk in Your Shoes* (The N).

### Degrassi: The Next Generation "Date Rape" (The N)

This show has a history of addressing real-life situations in a hypothetical environment that really hits home with teens. In this episode, a popular girl at school goes to a party hoping to impress a boy from another school. He goes too far and doesn't listen when she says "no." After she is raped, the girl works through her feelings. She feels guilty and angry. Her grades suffer and she distances herself from friends. The healing process takes a while, as it does in real life. Eventually the girl realizes that she needs to get counseling, and she learns the importance of pressing charges—

even if the rapist is not convicted—so others don't get hurt. One teen viewer commented that the program is well acted, and she appreciated the fact that the characters seem real and ordinary. This show could really help with the healing of a girl who has been a date-rape victim. It can also help others identify with the victims of such crimes and shows the importance of not keeping silent. Ages 14–18.

### On the Web HBOFamily.com

From relevant links to video clips to bulletin boards and games, this site is a terrific resource for parents who understand the far-reaching influence of television and want to take their viewing to the next level. Though HBO Family is structured around the premise of family viewing, vigilant parents will still want to watch the programs before allowing kids to view them. Suggested titles in the online Parent Handbook are unvarnished looks at teens, which should prove to be eye-openers for many parents. The comments posted on the bulletin boards give sobering insights into the mentality—and writing skills—of young viewers. The greatest gifts of the Web site are the links and addresses of related organizations that allow parents to follow up on topics broached in the Parent Handbook's titles.

### The-N.com

The-N.com opens with rather edgy graphics that don't accurately reflect the content of the site—a random sampling from 30 or so links on the home page found the content to be well written and not at all objectionable. The site tells users that The-N.com is a place they can come to let their "opinions loose, play games, make stuff, and hang out." Its greatest value may be found in the statement, "The-N.com is your community and it feeds The N on TV. So speak up, freely and often." True to its commitment, the site is sprinkled with polls and solicits input at every point, which is bound to make teen users feel like their opinions matter. The site has message boards, games, segments such as Dealing with It and Question Authority, and lots of promotion for *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. The game Avatar High is a clever, creative way for kids to work through personal issues and resolve conflicts in a healthy way. <