

# Presenting Prosocial TV Messages to Early Adolescents

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*Abstract: The scientific interest in adolescence goes back to Plato and Aristotle. Contemporary science distinguishes early adolescence as a focal time in children's physical, cognitive, moral, and social development as well as the beginning of a complex transition from childhood to adulthood. According to the 1995 report of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, a significant number of youths in early adolescence accept risk-taking behavior and internalize antisocial behavioral patterns that may stay with them throughout life. This risky antisocial behavior requires profound attention and intervention on the part of the family, school, and community at large. The Carnegie report suggested that social scientists concentrate on preventive strategies, including the constructive use of the mass media. Yet, more than ten years after the report, the positive role that mass media and television can play in these efforts remains mostly untapped. The present study had two aims: (a) to characterize, analyze, and identify strategies for presenting prosocial messages in a local TV program for youth in early adolescence—News Six; and, (b) to develop recommendations for community mass media activists and producers of children's TV programming. A content analysis of 114 News Six program episodes indicates that a locally oriented television series in which young people create and share stories about their communities, research various aspects of community life, interview local residents, write news reports, and host a TV show may teach constructive lessons of involvement and responsibility to family, school, community, and society as a whole. The study suggests that the development of prosocial programs for early adolescents featuring real-life positive role models from the community may contribute to children's well-being and ultimately help young viewers become better members of society.*

Keywords: Early Adolescents, Television, Local, Prosocial, Message, Content Analysis

## Introduction

**M**OST SCHOLARS AGREE that the essence of adolescence lies in the transition from childhood to adulthood which constitutes one of the imperative stages in human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erikson, 1968; Freud, 1961; Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1929/1997, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). It is generally acknowledged that adolescence starts with puberty and lasts until children are able to assume adult social roles. Early adolescence is currently recognized as a crucial time in children's physical, cognitive, moral, and social growth; it is an onset of social maturing and the beginning of a complex transition from childhood to adulthood. It is also the time of rapid acquisition of social knowledge, socially valued attitudes and dispositions, and the development of positive short-term and sustained behaviors that constitute the core of children's socialization process. However, little is known about the positive role that mass media, including television, can play in adolescent socialization, as well as how to present prosocial messages to early adolescents.

The purpose of the current study was twofold: (a) to characterize, analyze, and identify strategies of presenting prosocial messages in a local TV program for early adolescents; and, (b) to develop recommend-

ations regarding prosocial TV programs that may be applied in television production practices by community-oriented broadcast operations as well as community-based citizen groups.

## Scientific Interest in Adolescence

In Europe, the scientific interest in children's transition to adulthood goes back to Plato and Aristotle (Muuss, 1996). Throughout the Middle Ages, children were viewed as miniature adults. During modern times, the idea of children as a group of the population with particular social, emotional, and cognitive needs gradually emerged. Along came two opposing perspectives on child development. One tradition, founded by Locke, stated that children are shaped by the social environment and education. The second tradition was based on Rousseau's idea that human development is a unique metamorphosis or sequence of interconnected stages embedded in the innate world of a child. While Locke set the groundwork for the future behavioral and social learning theories, Rousseau laid the foundation for the contemporary developmental tradition (Crain, 2000; Muuss, 1996). Traces of these two basic approaches can be found in the current scholarship of adolescence.

In his famous survey of the New World's social scene, Alexis de Tocqueville (1966) drew the conclusion, "In America there is in truth no adolescence"



(p. 560). Indeed, in the social setting of pre-industrial society, American boys and girls assumed adult roles very early. The beginning of the industrial revolution did not change this situation. Jane Addams (1909/1930), a social activist, wrote that the sprawling industries of Chicago employed 12- to 14-year-old boys and girls in vast numbers. During the post-World War II period, the established pattern was reversed and adolescence was gradually recognized by society as a necessary and lengthy period of children's preparation for adulthood.

The second half of the 20th century was marked by the phenomenon of ever-expanding boundaries of adolescence. The revolution in information and communication technologies and the shaping of a knowledge-based type of economy placed new educational demands on the labor force (Cortada, 1998; Mortimer & Larson, 2002). These processes pushed the upper age limit of adolescence into the late 20s. The economic and social changes were also accompanied by physiological changes in adolescents. If at the time of Rousseau, puberty started at the age of fifteen, in modern industrialized countries it begins at twelve (Schickedanz, Schickedanz, Forsyth, & Forsyth, 2001).

Traditionally, social scientists simply registered these changes without making any wide-range inferences. The situation has changed at the end of the 20th century with a dramatic increase in adolescent research based on the use of a dynamic person-process-context paradigm grounded in developmental, ecological, and systems approaches (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Lerner, 2003; Lerner & Castellino, 1999; Lerner & Hess, 1999; Lerner & Jovanovic, 1999; Thelen & Smith, 1998). Newly constructed models of person-context developmental relations placed an emphasis on the interplay of biological, individual-psychological, social-interpersonal, institutional, cultural, and historical factors in adolescent behavior and development (see Lerner & Lerner, 1999; Lerner & Perkins, 1999). Epistemologically, these models were embedded in the idea of positive youth development as a proactive strategy in dealing with the risks and problematic behaviors of growing generations (Lerner & Ohannessian, 1999; Mussen & Eisenberg, 2001).

Several important conclusions were drawn. First, a view of adolescence as a period of storm and stress (Hall, 1905/1969), a developmental disturbance (Freud, 1965), or identity crisis (Erikson, 1968) was reexamined. Research has provided evidence that most adolescents successfully navigate through their passage to adulthood with the help of families, peers, and teachers (Bandura, 1999; Offer, Ostrov, Howard, & Atkinson, 1988). Secondly, psychodevelopmental changes attributed to pubertal growth were found less significant (Petersen, 1999). Next, the ideas

about the inevitability of emotional separation of adolescents from their parents were not supported (Grotevant, 1998). Instead, research demonstrated a "realignment and redefinition of family ties" (Steinberg, 1990, p. 255) in adolescence. Finally, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) theory of the ecology of human development enabled researchers to place adolescence in the context of social institutions, including community. Overall, a view of adolescence as a resource rather than a problem emerged (Lerner, 2002a, 2002b, 2003).

### **Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development**

In 1986, the Carnegie Foundation established the Council on Adolescent Development, which united various groups of researchers, educational practitioners, and social science experts in a process of inquiry and reassessment of adolescent development. The goal was to "foster positive outcomes for children and youth in the face of drastic changes in the American family and society" (Hamburg, 1996). After nearly ten years of work, the Carnegie Council summarized the research findings in its final report *Great transitions: Preparing adolescents for a new century* (1995).

The main argument of the report was that although early adolescence became a crucial phase in adolescent development, it had been comparatively overlooked by society and academia. Late childhood was viewed as an uneventful transition to adolescence during which behavioral problems were expected to begin. The Carnegie report argued that the period from 10 to 14 years is the time when young people begin adopting behavioral patterns that can have a life-long impact. A significant number of early adolescents accept risk-taking behaviors and internalize asocial behavioral patterns that may stay with them throughout life. This issue requires profound attention and intervention on the part of society. The report suggested concentrating on preventive strategies that deal with these risks, and expressed an idea that mass media can play a constructive role in these efforts.

Thus, the discussions among scholars that took place during the preparation of the Carnegie report changed the established view of early adolescence. According to Feldman and Elliott (1990, p. 2), three phases of adolescence were clearly identified: early (10-14 years), middle (15-17), and late adolescence (18 to mid-20s). A new approach towards understanding the structure and place of adolescence in the life span of human development signified the importance of early interventional strategies in dealing with behavioral and social risks in the lives of youth (Davis, 1999; Lerner, 1995).

Currently, it is acknowledged that adolescent development occurs in environmental contexts that can affect not only psychosocial and cognitive but also physiological changes such as the onset of puberty. Adolescents tend to question established principles and standards of behavior (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2002); consequently, they stand an increased risk of developing antisocial behaviors, i.e., actions that violate socially accepted rules, norms, or principles. In an attempt to uncover the roots of deviant adolescent behavior, Hirschi (1969/2002) introduced an innovative approach that gradually gained attention and recognition among researchers and practitioners. His analysis focused on the reasons why the majority of youth conform to law and order. Hirschi concluded that social bonds play a crucial role in the decisions of whether to withstand or engage in deviant behavior. Another study, a meta-analysis of age differences in children's prosocial behavior, found that early adolescents are generally more prosocial than other children (Fabes, Carlo, Kupanoff, & Laible, 1999).

### **Case Study: Adolescents and Local TV Production**

The present study examined a local educational program for American sixth grade students produced by the Northwest Ohio Educational Foundation and WBGU-TV, Bowling Green, Ohio. *News Six* targets the audience of early adolescents 11 and 12 years of age. Broadcast since 1972, the show has stayed on the air for more than thirty years and is one of the longest running and locally produced television broadcasts for children in the country. Along with other nationally or regionally distributed children's programs such as *NewsDepth* (WVIZ, Cleveland), the program is currently a part of a weekly afternoon instructional and enrichment block listed in the WBGU preview guide under the title "In-School Programming." Area teachers use the program for various learning projects in language arts, social studies, and media studies units.

However, *News Six* does not fully fit the definition of an instructional television program: a program planned to supplement or extend the traditional classroom curriculum. It is rather a community-oriented broadcast intended to address a specific segment of the general audience. With a strong accent on positive role models and an emphasis on socially valued beliefs and attitudes, *News Six* is a truly prosocial television program. Another essential feature is that educators, parents, community members, and most importantly, sixth grade students from northwest Ohio cities, small towns, and villages actively participate in the production of the show. The children propose topics for their school's episode of the program, research and write community news

stories, videotape a short segment about their school, become a part of the field production team on location, and host the show in the WBGU studio.

### **Research Question**

In order to contribute to the scholarly understanding of issues related to the production of television programming for early adolescents, this study examined the content of *News Six*, a locally produced and distributed children's television series. The following research question was addressed by the study:

RQ: What strategies of presenting prosocial messages have been employed in the program between 1972 and 2002?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study employed the exploratory paradigm and operational framework of the social cognitive theory of mass communication and viewed the content of *News Six* in terms of the socializing function that it serves for its audience. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 2001) maintains that people can gain new knowledge and skills through vicarious observational experiences. By watching prosocial portrayals, children may learn socially desirable ways of thinking and behaving such as kindness, generosity, sharing, helping, and cooperation. Among the factors that affect televised modeling of behavior are personal characteristics of the viewer; the social context; and the salience, attractiveness, and functional value of the models. As the social context of portrayals is one of the factors underlying the effectiveness of modeling outcomes, the images of classmates, teachers, parents, and people from the community that are relevant, familiar, and easily recognizable by the sixth graders may become potential sources of their internalized socialization. By observing the positive beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors depicted in these stories, students may make choices that will serve as guidelines for their prosocial behavior in the future.

### **Method**

In this study, nonfrequency content analysis (Berelson, 1952; George, 1959) was conducted for examining prosocial message strategies. A program episode was selected as the sampling unit and a single story as the recording unit. The sampling frame consisted of 566 located and identified programs. The study applied a random sample of 114 programs (20%) stratified by decade; two stories were randomly selected from each program ( $n = 228$ ).

Strategies of presenting prosocial messages were coded according to the methods identified by Lovelace and Huston (1983) and modified for the

purpose of the present research: (a) prosocial content only, i.e., without any contrasting antisocial behavior; (b) prosocial content in contrast with antisocial; (c) prosocial resolution of a conflict; and, (d) portrayal of negative outcomes of antisocial behavior.

The “prosocial only” category was further subdivided into eight subgroups to reflect recent research findings: (a) positive role model portrayal (Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Linebarger, & Wright, 2001; Bandura, 2002); (b) portrayal of positive character engaged in prosocial activities (Stipp, Hill-Scott, & Dorr, 1987); (c) portrayal of group character engaged in prosocial activities; (d) portrayal of positive outcomes of prosocial behavior; (e) description of a community-based prosocial event; (f) depiction of cross-generational positive social interactions; (g) depiction of positive social interactions involving the elderly, disabled, and disadvantaged; and, (h) other.

The analysis of audio-visual material was aimed to determine how elements of prosocial content were communicated in the story and to identify what were the key elements of message auditory and visual support. The following types of auditory elements were coded for the analysis: story lead-in (i.e., introduction to the story); anchor reading the story; reporter stand-up; reporter voiceover narration; character on-camera or off-camera comment; interview or dialogue; and music and sound effects. Visual support for prosocial content consisted of studio shots of the anchor with no accompanying visuals; color slides or full-screen stills; studio guest interview; studio demonstration; video footage shot in school; video footage shot on location; and on-screen text or graphics.

The measurement of categories in this analysis was limited to dichotomous choices such as “present” or “not present”; the acceptable level of intercoder reliability was defined as equal to or above .70. Holsti’s (1969) percent agreement, the ratio of observed agreements to the total number of observations, reached the desired level for all variables.

## Results

The research question for this study asked what strategies of presenting prosocial content were found in a local television program for early adolescents. First, the results of the analysis demonstrate that for over three decades the series has been presenting rich community, school, and family-oriented prosocial messages. Secondly, the analysis revealed that the news stories consistently employed the first strategy, i.e., depicting only prosocial content. Some early stories mentioned natural disasters, e.g., the flood of 1913 in Tiffin; very few stories made inferences to antisocial incidents, e.g., stolen birds from the Toledo Zoo in the late 1970s; and none of the stories included portrayals of antisocial behaviors or their negative consequences. Although stories about such school-based programs as D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) related to negative aspects of behavior, e.g., gang activities, none of them contained depictions of the latter. Overall the prosocial only category, i.e., prosocial content without any contrasting antisocial content, was predominant.

Table 1 gives an overview of strategies identified within the prosocial only category. Nearly a third of the stories (30%) in the final sample revolved around the portrayals of a positive character engaged in socially valued activities either at a job or through voluntary or civic involvement. These stories demonstrate social connectedness, a strong work ethic, persistence, consideration for others, and other positive traits. The second largest group of stories (24%) depicted positive group characters (two or more persons) engaged in prosocial activities, for example, a group of sixth grade students visiting a museum, a senior center, or being involved in a recycling project at their school. The third group (18%) was based on demonstrating positive outcomes of prosocial behavior, for example, a new business, a restored town hall, or an adopted animal at an animal shelter.

**Table 1: Strategies of Message Presentation (n = 228)**

Message Presentation Strategy	Percent of Stories
Portrayal of positive character engaged in prosocial activities	30%
Depiction of group character engaged in prosocial activities	24%
Portrayal of positive outcomes of prosocial behavior	18%
Positive role model portrayal	14%
Description of a prosocial event	7%
Portrayal of cross-generational positive social interactions	4%
Portrayal of positive social interactions involving the elderly, disabled, and disadvantaged	3%
	100%

Of all stories in the sample, 14% employed the strategy of presenting a positive role model. These stories portrayed a strong character possessing socially valued personal traits and demonstrating prosocial behavior. In many cases, a student-reporter would tell a story about a parent or grandparent, or a person from school or the nearby community: a fellow classmate, teacher, firefighter, business owner, blacksmith, or a retired person with an interesting hobby. Third, the examination of message auditory support (see Table 2) indicated that character com-

ments made on and off camera were the primary method of auditory support (53%). The next category, anchor reading the story, was found only in 17% of all stories, while reporter voiceover narration and interview or dialogue were employed in 14% of the stories. It should be noted that in a small number of stories (2%) music and sound effects played a key role in carrying a prosocial theme and reinforcing the message. None of the stories in the total sample utilized the story lead-in and reporter stand-up for presenting prosocial messages.

**Table 2: Key Elements of Message Auditory Presentation (n = 228)**

Auditory Presentation	Percent of Stories
Character on- or off-camera comments	53%
Anchor reading the story	17%
Reporter voiceover narration	14%
Interview/dialogue	14%
Music and sound effects	2%
Story lead-in/introduction	0%
Reporter stand-up	0%
	100%

In more than half of all stories (51%), the prosocial messages were supported by video footage shot on location (Table 3). These included stories about local

farming, industries, businesses, and people from the area. Video footage of the school comprised the

**Table 3: Key Elements of Message Visual Presentation (n = 228)**

Visual Presentation	Percent of Stories
Video footage shot on location	51%
Video footage shot in school	22%
Studio shots of anchors with no accompanying visuals	17%
Color slides	5%
Studio interview	4%
Studio demonstration	1%
	100%

second largest group of visual support methods (22%), while studio shots of anchors with no accompanying visuals were used in 17% of the stories. These were mostly stories from the 1970s, when field equipment was not always available for the production. Consequently, stories from the 1970s often relied on color slides or full-screen images (5%); this strategy worked very successfully when accompanied with good narration and engaging music. A studio interview with a guest, e.g., an exchange student from overseas, effectively contributed to message salience, involvement, and clarity. Studio demonstration (1%), such as playing a musical instrument or

performing a dance, was another useful method of presentation in the 1970s that became completely forgotten in the following decades.

Finally, theme explicitness grew from 67% of all stories in the 1970s to 100% in the 2000s (see Table 4). This trend can be explained by the increased technical complexity and the improvement of the overall production quality of the series. From simple stories with no visual support read by the student-anchors in the television studio, the program evolved to a sophisticated magazine-format show with a number of pre-edited features.

**Table 4: Theme Explicitness by Decade (n = 228)**

Prosocial Theme	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000-2002
Explicit	67%	74%	86%	100%
Implicit	33%	26%	14%	0%
	100%	100%	100%	100%
	<i>n</i> = 52	<i>n</i> = 92	<i>n</i> = 76	<i>n</i> = 8

Closely related to the increased complexity of the production is the evolution of message attributes summarized in Table 5. As it appears from the data

in Table 5, the percentage of clear, salient, and engaging messages grew steadily over time.

**Table 5: Message Attributes by Decade (n = 228)**

Prosocial Message	1970s	1980s	1990-2002
Clear	66%	53%	79%
Salient	37%	58%	64%
Engaging	66%	81%	93%
Age appropriate	100%	100%	100%
Relevant	100%	100%	100%
	<i>n</i> = 52	<i>n</i> = 92	<i>n</i> = 84

Overall, the program was found aesthetically pleasing and integrated a number of appealing formal features. These features include unusual camera angles, children's voiceovers, eye-catching transitions between segments, music, animation, and sound effects. In addition, the stories were produced in such a way that they could be viewed with interest not only by the sixth graders but also by the general audience, parents, teachers, and retired persons in the community.

## Conclusion

Television has a great power in creating role models that can affect young people's attitudes and behavioral predispositions (Anderson et al., 2001; Bandura, 2002). A closer look at the content of a local television series for children and adolescents from the premises of the social cognitive theory suggests several insights into the issue of applicability of prosocial television as a genre of children's programming.

Television can effectively deliver socially desirable messages, shared values, and beliefs to the growing generations (Harris, 2004; Johnston & Ettema, 1986; Van Evra, 2004). However, to be successful, a media message has to attract interest and generate involvement (McGuire, 1989). This case study suggests that a message grounded in a local community context is likely to pass these necessary steps of message dissemination. A locally oriented series in which young people create and share stories, research various aspects of community life,

interview local residents, write news reports, and host a TV show, can teach important lessons about social involvement, responsibility to family, school, community, and society as a whole.

Finally, at the local level, prosocial television has the potential to become a feasible programming alternative to the proliferation of televised representations that negatively affect young people's behaviors. The purpose of introducing community-oriented prosocial TV programs is to foster the development of a social and moral base in children and young adolescents that can guide them through life. The development of prosocial programs for early adolescents featuring real-life positive role models from the community can contribute to children's well-being and, ultimately, can help young viewers become better members of society.

## Study Recommendations

### Recommendations for TV Producers

1. Create programs that feature local community-oriented content and prosocial themes, such as the social value of work, preservation of the environment, cultural, and historical traditions, good citizenship, social connectedness, and involvement. Utilize social and human potential of the community and its capacity for generating prosocial messages.
2. Get teachers, parents, and students involved with selecting the topics and story angles, conducting interviews, and writing stories. Keep

- the children's perspective and the original focus of the stories as much as possible. This will prevent the stories from displaying excessive didacticism and artificial moralizing. In addition, when children are involved in the creation of a message, it is more likely that such a message would be relevant and interesting for them, and that the lesson will be understood by the target audience of young viewers.
3. Use various strategies for presenting socially desired behaviors and attitudes to young viewers: depict positive outcomes of prosocial behaviors; feature group characters engaged in community-based volunteer organizations and activities; show prosocial events; portray positive social interactions between children and the elderly; tell stories about people with disabilities who actively participate in school and community-based activities, promoting awareness of disability, and fostering positive attitudes regarding those with disabilities.
  4. Explore the altruistic themes of helping, sharing, caring, cooperation, generosity, trust, and kindness; find subjects which highlight cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity; concentrate on topics related to home and family that may produce messages emphasizing close family ties or depict families working together.
  5. Depict positive characters that may also present constructive messages to children. This research found that stories about real-life characters such as parents, teachers, local farmers, small business owners, and people from the neighborhood convey clear and salient messages that are un-

derstandable, engaging, and relevant to the viewers.

6. The virtues of prosocial television are credibility, objectivity, and accuracy. Pay careful attention to selecting role models as a strategy of presentation. Let teachers, students, and parents choose a model that students will identify with.

### **Recommendations for Community Media Activists**

1. Study the local community or neighborhood, contact local schools, libraries, museums to get ideas for a community-oriented television program. Explore local topics such as neighborhood and community festivals, sport events, landmarks, and people.
2. Forge a partnership with all parties that may benefit from and may be interested in the production of a local television show or newscast for youth.
3. Get children, adolescents, and their families involved with writing stories for the program, selecting topics and story angles. Provide an engaging and creative environment for youth to be part of the project.
4. Organize the necessary training for youth and adults.
5. Secure start-up financial backing, find local underwriters, contact local TV stations and cable systems.
6. Organize a community or neighborhood screening of the final product and turn the preview into a community event.

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