

CPYU Trend Alert:

TV for Tweens by Chris Wagner

Television programs produced specifically for the tween demographic are taking off. Cable television is beginning to find a niche among tween viewers by focusing on live-action shows. Evidence of this can be seen in the recent success of *Disney's High School Musical* franchise and *Hannah Montana*, as well as Nickelodeon's *Drake & Josh* and *The Naked Brothers Band*. Tweens, of course, have always watched television. However back in the late 1990's, a gradual shift began occurring among broadcast networks that largely neglected this age group. Dan Schneider, creator of past and present Nickelodeon hits such as *Zoey 101* and *The Amanda Show* says that networks used to air family shows during primetime hours. As of recent years, these time slots have become edgier and racier and as a result, young children and tweens (with diligent parents) were left to view shows elsewhere. Because cable channels had been marketing shows to tweens for many years already, they were primed and ready to step in and fill the programming void.

Tweens are in a stage of their lives where they're no longer beginning to think of themselves as kids. They have not reached full-fledged adolescence, yet are beginning to test their independence and find their individuality. Gary Marsh, the Disney Channel's president for entertainment says, "[Tweens] are trapped between the cocoon and comfort of being a child, and the rebellion and independence they want as a teenager. So your goal is trying to satisfy all those needs that kids have." Though differing opinions exist, cable companies generally categorize the tween demographic as being between 9 and 14 years old. The shows that connect best are those whose main characters fall in the same age-group as their tween audience and deal with real-life situations that tweens can relate to, usually with a humorous twist. In an article for USA Today, Gary Levin reports, "Shows are imbued with moral messages, friendship and preteen angst, which are sugarcoated with comedy." Episodes will often revolve around problems faced with friends, in school, or with parents.

The last several years have seen hits such as *Lizzie McGuire* and *That's So Raven*. *Lizzie McGuire* launched the career of Hilary Duff while *That's So Raven*, starring Raven-Symone of *The Cosby Show* fame, has gone on to become the longest-running Disney Channel original series to date. Disney brought even more attention to the marketability of this genre in early 2006 with the made-for-TV movie *High School Musical*, which has been an immense success. The success of *HSM* spawned an entire franchise that includes books, CD's, live shows, and more. The soundtrack to *High School Musical* went on to sit atop the Billboard charts for several weeks and was the highest selling CD release of 2006 across all categories. The cable networks realize that a lot more money can be made by franchising characters or shows and creating products for their hit TV shows that move beyond the small screen. One of the keys to this success is getting tweens to interact with the programming. Disney encouraged viewers to host parties during additional airings of *HSM* that featured the words to songs across the bottom of the screen - karaoke style - and the opportunity to learn the dance moves step-by step, taught by the actors and actresses themselves. Nickelodeon will begin airing the new show *iCarly* this fall. Viewers will have the opportunity to contribute to the show by sending in videos of themselves that may air during the program.

Disney is genius in cross-marketing, often casting young teens that have the potential to record and sell music as well. The *Hannah Montana* franchise released a top-selling CD while the show was still in its first season. Nickelodeon's newest hit, *The Naked Brothers Band*, is an attempt at jumping on this bandwagon. The shows' website features music videos and mp3s and Nickelodeon has plans to release a CD. As they did with *HSM*, Disney casts their most popular characters in made-for-TV movies knowing that these characters' loyal fan bases are likely to watch. Examples of this are the movie *Cadet Kelly*, starring Hilary Duff and Christy Carlson Romano (*Even Stevens*) and *The Cheetah Girls* movies which featured Raven-Symone.

Parents often assume that shows on these kid-friendly networks are safe for their young children. However, as the networks begin to "grow-up" and focus on tween fair, parents might want to start paying attention. The tween years are an especially impressionable time and it's important that parents know what messages tweens are receiving from the shows they watch. As writers tap into the "real-life" situations of 14 year-olds for new shows and episodes, parents need to be aware of the

content of these shows to determine if it is appropriate for a 9 year-old (who falls in the same targeted demographic) to be watching. Generally speaking, the tween shows on Nickelodeon and Disney are wholesome, light-hearted fun. This doesn't mean however, that parents should get a free-pass at monitoring their tweens TV viewing habits. These shows offer glimpses into the everyday lives of tweens, and as such can be a valuable tool to learn more about their interests, struggles, friendships, and family dynamics. Also, tweens are at the perfect age to begin teaching media discernment. If they're ready to begin watching shows that deal with "real-life" situations then parents should be helping them learn what the Bible has to say about these circumstances as well.

Unlike major networks that air their shows once a week, tween shows often air numerous episodes several times in a single week. Combine this with the franchising of shows beyond the television screen and the proliferation of using popular stars in music videos, movies, advertisements and more and tweens have the opportunity to see or hear their favorite stars regularly. They can also visit the websites of their favorite show or young actor/actress. Unfortunately, today's children and early teens are not immune to our celebrity-driven culture. Young and impressionable, tweens can easily become obsessed with their favorite star and look to them as a role model. It's important for parents to discuss what a proper role model is with their tweens and what a biblical role model looks like. Girls, especially, will look to TV characters for the latest fashion trends. Are you comfortable with your daughter wearing the outfits they see on TV? Take the opportunity to promote modesty. Youth workers could address the sin of idolatry and could help students explore the difference between a healthy affection and an unhealthy obsession. Parents must have boundaries in place for their tweens, limiting their TV viewing and their access to other forms of media and encouraging other activities.

As children grow up, so will their television shows. Will cable networks be resigned to knowing that their targeted audience will eventually move on to more mature fare, or will they attempt to push the envelope of tween programming and grow older with them? Only time will tell. Regardless, make yourself aware of the shows your tween is watching and help them begin forming healthy media habits at an early age.

Popular Tween TV shows: (as of May 2007)

Show Title	Cable Network	Brief Synopsis
<i>The Suite Life of Zack & Cody</i>	Disney	Comedy about identical twins living at the Tipton Hotel with their single mother who is a lounge singer at the hotel.
<i>Hannah Montana</i>	Disney	Hannah Montana is a preteen who just moved from Tennessee to Malibu, and now has to adapt to the new lifestyle. She also lives a secret life as a pop star, overseen by her father/manager.
<i>The Naked Brothers Band</i>	Nickelodeon	Cameras follow musical brothers Nat and Alex in a mockumentary style as their band becomes a tween sensation.
<i>Drake & Josh</i>	Nickelodeon	The chaotic relationship between two 15-year-old stepbrothers, played by two former cast members of <i>The Amanda Show</i> .
<i>Cory in the House</i>	Disney	A <i>That's So Raven</i> spin-off that finds new adventures for the always-scheming-to-make-a-buck Cory, who accompanies his father, Victor, on his new gig as White House chef.
<i>Zoey 101</i>	Nickelodeon	A confident teen finds life at an idyllic Malibu boarding school to be mostly fun as she meets new challenges and forms close friendships with a diverse group of classmates.
<i>Ned's Declassified School Survival Guide</i>	Nickelodeon	Middle-school teens deal with daily dilemmas such as bullies, bad haircuts and weird teachers.

Synopsis Sources: www.imdb.com and www.tvguide.com

Check out the Nick.com and Disney.com to learn more about these shows as well as others not listed above.

**For more information on today's youth culture, visit the website of the
Center for Parent/Youth Understanding at
www.cpyu.org.**