

# CAMmer in the Spotlight

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### Getting to know... Dan Anderson

**What are you currently working on?** Although I am retired and no longer collecting new data, my students and I have amassed a large amount of research that is yet to be written up. As an example, my current and last, doctoral student, Katherine Hanson, recontacted families we had studied when the children were aged one year. In the original work, we obtained extensive home and laboratory information about their television and baby video exposure. Kat assessed the children, now between 7 and 9 years of age, for executive function, vocabulary, academic achievement, and other things that have been claimed to be influenced by baby video viewing. We are working on analyzing this rich data set, part of which will form the basis for Kat's dissertation. Other studies examine the influence of television on toddler toy play, the long-term relationship of television viewing to achievement in a national sample of children,

and the relationship of television viewing to parent language directed at toddlers. Kat and I are also working with a



colleague at UMass, David Arnold, on a project to assess the influence of mobile educational apps on preschool achievement.

**What has been your most memorable project, and why?** Although I can't call it my project, my work on *Blue's Clues* is the most memorable. I was the principal academic advisor for the creation and early years of the series and worked closely with Angela Santomero, the show's primary creator, and Alice Wilder, the curriculum and research director. They read my papers on children and television and

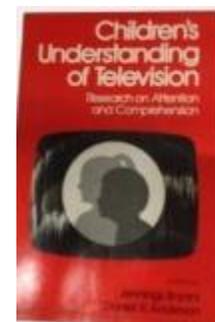
together we put ideas taken from my and others' research into the overall and specific design of the program. Put simply, it was great fun and hugely gratifying to see my research put into practice. I gave a lecture to a class on cognitive development at Mount Holyoke College yesterday, and was pleased to find that every single one of the students in the class had been avid *Blue's Clues* viewers when they were young children. The show was not only successful for Nickelodeon, but Jennings Bryant's evaluation study indicated that it had substantial positive effects on its viewers. Of many memorable projects, that is my favorite.

**Which achievement are you most proud of, and why?** I elaborate on this below, but when I began to study children and television, the overwhelmingly dominant view, expressed in books and articles such as the *Plug-In Drug*, was that television viewing is deeply passive and inimical to cognitive development and education. My research was showing otherwise, that children were often cognitively and sometimes behaviorally active when watching television. Eventually, at the behest of Peggy Charron, I was able to make this argument when testifying in Congress for the Children's Television Act, and it became the

basis for programs such as *Blue's Clues* and *Dora the Explorer*. Another achievement that is much less well known, but one of which I am inordinately proud, is the discovery and elaboration of attentional inertia in television viewing. In brief, due to its seamless top-down, bottom-up nature, attention to television builds on itself, deepening comprehension and memory. For those who are interested, John Richards and I wrote a chapter summarizing this work in the 2004 volume of *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*.

**What would be your work motto?** When it comes to research results, it doesn't matter what your hypothesis was when you designed the study because the children are always right.

**Which of your publications is your favorite, and why?** I wrote a chapter with my student, Elizabeth Lorch, that was published in a book edited by Jennings Bryant and me (Anderson & Lorch, 1983). In that chapter we argued (in contrast to a great deal of thinking at that time) that children's TV viewing was cognitively active. The ideas in that chapter supported the notion that television had the potential to be an effective



supplement to education for children, and was part of the ideas underlying my work on *Blue's Clues* and *Dora the Explorer*.

It was also a basis for my expectation that educational television would have a long term positive impact on children, an expectation that was verified in my second favorite publication on early childhood television viewing and adolescent behavior. We found a clear longitudinal association between preschool educational television viewing, particularly Sesame Street, and high school grades in English, math, and science. It was great to collaborate on that study with the CRITC research group then at the University of Kansas.

**If you had unlimited resources, what kind of project would you want to do and why?** In the 1980s my students and I did an extensive observational study of television viewing as it occurred in homes. We recorded and analyzed thousands of hours of time-lapse video that automatically recorded activity in front of family TV sets. It was a really hard study to do. Now, the technology for doing home observations is extraordinary and such a study could be done with much less cost and effort. Combined with

technologies such as button cams that kids could wear, physiological monitoring with smart watches, and the like, extraordinary studies of media use and its consequences could be done. Add to that, neural imaging technology, makes me wish I was starting my research career now instead of bringing it to a close.

**If you had to give one piece of advice to young CAM scholars, what would it be?** Bring your research to real-world practice. With respect to advising parents on child rearing and improving children's media production, you have it in your hands to make the world a better place.

**Who would you like to put in the spotlight next, and why?** Patti Valkenburg is doing an extraordinary amount of important and innovative research. I would love to read her answers to these questions.

### **Reference**

Anderson, D. R. & Lorch, E. P. (1983). Looking at television: Action or reaction? In J. Bryant & D. R. Anderson (Eds.), *Children's understanding of TV: Research on attention and comprehension* (pp. 1-34). New York: Academic Press.