Producer advises parents to try turning off the tube

By GLORIA NEWMAN SLIMAK

Although she makes her living in children's television, Hedda Bluestone Sharapan doesn't hesitate to advise parents to turn off the television set and communicate more with their children.

"Kids need to be doing and playing," said the keynote speaker at the 16th annual Preschool and Early Childhood Education Conference at Oakland University.

Mrs. Sharapan spoke not only as associate producer of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" but also as a coconcerned parent of two young daughters.

Developing instant rapport with her audience of teachers, students and parents, she illustrated the tremendous "power" of television.

Asking the audience to spell "relief" brought smiles and nods of understanding, as lips formed the letters of the nationally advertised product (Rolaids) seen on television commericials.

If adults are influenced so readily by what flicks across the screen, "What kind of power does television have on children?" asked Mrs. Sharapan.

According to a recent Nielsen rating, the average child watches three to four hours of television daily. And preschoolers watch more than any other age group, explained the guest speaker, a McKeesport, Pa. native.

"EVERY CHILD is different and relates differently to the media," she said.

Admitting her older child is a "TV nut," Mrs. Sharapan explained that the influence of television on children "depends on inner dramas — what's going on inside them."

So many variables, such as the nature of the child, peer pressure and parents' attitude toward television, affect the power of this medium. Therefore, it's important to ask "What does that program mean to that child?"

Because television is in the business of delivering commercials to the audience, where "the program is only bait," Sharapan feels the industry is not concerned enough with some of the adverse effects on children.

According to Mrs. Sharapan, researchers have found that some of the major effects of television are:

- Children's "direct imitation" of what they see on the screen.
- Children "generalize aggression." "The message is not that crime doesn't pay, but that people are aggressive," the speaker explained.
- Not only do children see violence, but they become immune to it. "Violence is antiseptic; cleaned up. You don't see the real pain and hurt."
- Children that watch more than four hours of television daily tend to be more fearful than other children.

IN ADDITION, television represents a "limited view of life" as it often portrays stereotypes of men, women, family life and jobs, believes Mrs. Sharapan.

Situation comedies such as "Three's Company" also distort children's concept of sexuality. "Warm affection is not shown, but exploitation and instant gratification is," she said.

The commercials also misrepresent reality by flashing on the screen "20,000 messages a year on how to be happy," said Mrs. Sharapan.

Although television does have power, Mrs. Sharapan offered the following suggestions to counteract this influence:

- "Use our eyes." Watching television programs children watch becomes a "window to their minds."
- "Use our mouth and talk about television." Asking children questions about what they saw helps them "digest and integrate it, not just soak it in."
- "Use our hand." Writing criticism as well as praise to television stations and sponsors is a way for audiences to influence television. "Joining hands with others" through national and local television groups such as "Action for Children's Television" was also encouraged.
- Use our finger and turn our sets off." By turning off the television, other forms of activities are encouraged. Without the intrusion of television, children can learn to communicate with parents during meals and in the evening.

"BEDTIME CAN be some of the most beautiful time spent with a child," believes Mrs. Sharapan.

Admitting pushing that off-button isn't a always easy, she recommended "gradual weaning" by limiting television watching to only certain hours or days.

After her remarks about unfavorable aspects of children's television, Mrs. Sharapan reminded her audience that some worthwhile programs do exist. And naturally she's proud of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood," where she worked for 14 years.

The associate producer spoke highly of Fred Rogers, who writes most of the show's scripts and music. He is a "television friend" who makes a visit" to your home. She considers Rogers (an ordained Presbyterian minister who "serves people through television" to be a "significant other" (person) in a child's life.

THE PROGRAM'S basic philosophy is to "help children grow in a healthy way" and emphasize each child's uniqueness, explained Mrs. Sharapan. It also teaches children to communicate by stressing that "feelings are mentionable as well as manageable."

"Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" has had essentially the same format since it okmb 1968. But the show has "become more problem-oriented" in recent years, the speaker said.

Five years ago the program was put on a two-year cycle, which has given Rogers the freedom to explore other areas in television such as evening shows for parents. One on divorce will be shown soon.

Mrs. Sharapan first met Rogers at television station WQED (Metropolitan Pittsburgh Public Broadcasting, Inc.) in 1965. As a young, single graduate armed with both a B.S. degree in psychology and a teaching degree, she talked with Rogers during her job search.

Although she left without a job, she took Rogers' advice and went back to school for a master's degree in child development from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

Still in graduate school and married, Mrs. Sharapan was asked to join the staff of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood." As assistant director, she received no pay.

Two titles later, and now paid, Mrs. Sharapan refers to her career as a "Cinderella job" that she thoroughly enjoys. Her dedication and enthusiasm has led her to "often forget to pick up my paycheck," she laughed.

That enthusiasm extends to her public relations responsibilities — answering fan mail, developing print materials and giving speeches to professional and parent groups, colleges and civic organizations.

Her speeches include the topic of dealing with children's feelings about death and illness. Fondly known as the "local deathnik" at work, she's in charge of death education for "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" and recently wrote a pamphlet "Talking With Young Children About Death."

When asked what she'd like to do in the future, Mrs. Sharapan admitted she's "doing it now."

"It is such a professional challenge. For awhile it was like I was Mrs. Rogers — doing the show for him. Now I'm doing it for me."

Adoption coming out of its secret world

By MARGARET MILLER

Light is coming through the dark secrecy that for so long has surrounded adoption, and the development is welcome by one Westland mother with an adopted daughter.

Carolyn Bochur finds herself involved in a lively movement that has come about this year since the Michigan legislature passed Public Act 116.

The act opens adoption records to persons over 18 who request the information.

"I like the new law — I think it's a good law at this time," said Mrs. Bochur.

She said she rejects both the practice of keeping adoption a secret from the child and the long-prevalent notion that the child should be told he's adoped and special but protected from specific knowledge of his origins and any chance of encounter.

So much has this idea been part of the culture that adoption agencies have kept their books tightly closed once an adoption is completed, Mrs. Bochur pointed out.

"But we are realizing that for an adoptee you are not complete until you know about your heritage," she said. "It's a little like amnesia — you have a past but you don't know it. Once you know, your mind is at rest and you can go about the rest of your life."

MRS. BOCHUR can see the whole triangular picture, involving adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents — the term now used instead of the "natural parents" of decades past.

She was probably ahead of her time in the way she handled information with her adopted daughter Karen, now 13.

And recently, largely through some reading in Ann Landers' columns, she has become involved in two organizations, the Michigan Adoptive Parents Association and the Adoption Identity Movement of Michigan,Inc.

Mrs. Bochur and her husband had known Karen's birth mother in Colorado before they adopted the little girl at the tender age of 44 hours. "It was a private adoption, but we were checked out by two agencies," she said.

Over the years she has kept in touch with the mother, she said, "although we moved around and lost track of her for a while."

"It has been fairly easy for me to give progress reports," she said. "How she's doing in school, things like that. So many parents who give up a baby never hear anything more — how the child is doing, even whether he was adopted or is alive."

But not too long ago Mrs. Bochur had another decision to make.

"Karen was wondering about her birth mother," she said. "She's very open, and I knew she was wondering. She said she wanted to write to her but didn't know what to say."

So this adoptive mother arranged a short telephone conversation. "That was it — that was enough," she reported. "She could stop putting so much attention on that matter and get on with things."

IT WAS ABOUT this time that Mrs. Bochur read several letters about adoption in Ann Landers' column.

"She told these adults who had been adopted and wanted to know about their birth parents that it would be best to leave well enough alone," said this Westland mother.

"I couldn't agree. I wrote to her and suggested that instead of giving that kind of advice she should tell people to look up groups in their area that deal with the problem."

And then she decided to take her own advice seriously.

She had known about the Michigan Adoptive Parents Association, for short MaPa. She heard about the Adoption Identity Movement (AIM). She decided to find out more about both.

"I feel the more I can learn, the better able I will be to help my daughter and anyone else," she explained. "I don't want to be closed-minded."

Mrs. Bochur learned, for example, that many parents who have adopted children don't like the new law and feel threatened by it.

"I can understand that," she said. "They have the feeling that if they let the birth parents into the picture they may lose there children. But the law applies only to adults, and by the age of 18 an adoptee should be able to think for himself.

"And even birth parents who raise their own children don't have them forever."

SHE ALSO LEARNED that the AIM group, while offering help to persons involved in adoptions, also is adult only and definitely does not advocate search.

"It's an individual thing," she said. "For some it is the right thing; for others it is not. Some people may want to know who their birth parents are, but never make a move to contact them.

"Some may have one reunion and then choose not to keep the relationship going. But for some, the medical information and the understanding of heridity is invaluable."

AIM meetings, she said, are heavy on discussion.

"It's only by sitting down with others, airing opinions, finding out why they feel as they do, that we can work through our confusing feelings and be ready to really enjoy our children," she said.

"I have learned that some adopted children don't learn this until they are adults, even middle-aged. Then it is devastating information. They can't handle it. A group like this can help."

Adoptive parents, birth parents or adult adoptees interested may call her at 595-0540.

Information on the established AIM group is available from Elma Thompson, 546-9175. Those interested in contacting MAPA may write to P.O. Box 53, Dearborn Heights.