

## **The Challenge Of Using Popular Culture To Explore Racism And Prejudice With School Aged Children:**

***'You know I'm sick and tired of people assuming I'm good at basketball just because I'm African American. ( Slam dunks the ball )'***. Carl Carlson, The Simpsons, Episode 268, FOX Studios™

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The television program The Simpsons has been a regular fixture on Australian television for almost twenty years, while many will disagree with the moral, social and political messages portrayed in this animated satire, there are social commentators that believe the Simpsons successfully holds a mirror to contemporary western society. The Simpsons is one of the thousands of popular culture images that children are exposed to every day. This paper aims to look at practical approaches to using these cultural icons as tools for promoting positive attitudes to diversity in OSHC programs. I hope this will inspire and inform further discussion in OSHC services about using the media and popular culture.

Often Australians are accused of being cultureless. It is not uncommon to ask an Australian what their cultural background is and receive the response "I don't have one, I'm just Australian". Australia is a culturally diverse society, we do not practice one religion, subscribe to one set of political or moral values nor do we implement one model of child rearing practices. However we commonly generalise our cultural experiences and dismiss them as having no impact on our day to day lives. The reality is we all believe something, we all enjoy something, and we all have a place in the community. Everyone came from parents, who had parents, who came from somewhere and all of that history plays a part in the person that stands here today.

Many theories can be offered as to why some Australians are quick to dismiss the rich history that makes up the life of each individual and each family. Regardless of the reasons for this rejection of culture, any staff working with children has a responsibility to support each child's social and emotional development. Understanding the importance of culture in our own lives and the lives of others is a significant part of these skills.

Some of our differences are easily visible, other aspects are harder to identify, but they all make up who we are. School aged children are on a journey of self discovery which will continue until they die. This is a developing skill for children, and like mastering any new skill, they will experience fear, success, failure, uncertainty and strive to be accepted. This fear and uncertainty often leads to bullying behaviours as children experiment with the power of the peer group. It is important that the staff working in OSHC programs have a clear understanding of their own values, beliefs and culture so they are well prepared when these issues arise. This self awareness is a critical component in effectively guiding the children to develop positive attitudes towards diversity which will shape their self image and how they will learn to participate in the community. What you believe and what you do will influence how you incorporate popular culture into the OSHC program.

Websters Dictionary provides this definition " contemporary lifestyle and items that are well known and generally accepted, cultural patterns that are widespread within a population; also called pop culture."

Media and Popular culture are prevalent in almost every facet of our lives. More than ever school aged children are exposed to images, ideas, issues and experience the pressure to have the 'right' brands of toys, clothing, etc. Most practitioners would agree that childhood is different now when compared to our own childhood experiences.

The reality now for school aged children is very different from twenty years ago. The focus on appearance has changed dramatically. Many primary aged children are now much more conscious of body image with the media reporting an increase in the numbers of pre-teens suffering eating disorders. The media and popular culture are also exposing children to concepts that historically have been viewed to be the domain of the adult: sex, war, politics and religion to name a few.

Every generation has new icons, fashions and trends. The images presented by today's popular culture will have different meanings for both OSHC staff and the children in their care. Every person has bias, our values and beliefs shape our sense of right and wrong. The issue of positive and negative role models is a common challenge for OSHC staff, teachers and parents. Helping children grow into happy, healthy and responsible adults often requires the adult to choose which battles they want to fight. In terms of battles the use of popular culture can be a minefield. It is important that OSHC staff can make the distinction between what they dislike (the generation gap) and material that is inappropriate for use by children in the program. When decisions based on mutual respect are made regarding the materials used in the program the beliefs of the child are valued and the exclusion of materials does not result in value judgements being made about the child's family.

Choosing music for children in the OSHC program is often a cause of frustration. It is important that OSHC staff consider what it is about the music children are interested in, that appeals to them. Music has an ability to inspire an emotional response, to promote activism and to reinforce positive attitudes towards diversity. Children can find inspiration in the music they listen to and the lyrics can reflect a wide range of values and beliefs and can be used to stimulate discussion with children about a broad range of issues. When OSHC staff help children evaluate and reflect on the music they want to listen to at OSHC they are supporting the development of skills that will benefit their social development. By providing activities which require children to assume a level of responsibility staff are encouraging children to value the contribution that their peers and icons make to the community. Australian artists like the John Butler Trio and Powderfinger use their music to advocate for reconciliation and environmental issues. The American singer Pink uses her music to speak about her political views, social justice and self image issues for young women. While this music may not appeal to the taste of OSHC staff it not only appeals to the children in their care but can also make important social statements.

The challenge is for staff and families to collaborate with children. Developing and implementing policies and practices that are legally and socially responsible. While demonstrating respect for the values and beliefs of children. As adults we need to be secure enough to say it's OK for children to have interests that hold no appeal to us. That is how society changes throughout the decades; each generation develops its own identity. Despite

how misunderstood or revolutionary we may have seen ourselves in our teenage years, most people I speak to are surprised how as they get older, how similar they become to their parents.

It is important we demonstrate to children how we compromise, negotiate and learn about each other when faced with opposing views. The effective OSHC program is a composite of values those of the school, community, staff, children and families.

Respecting the values of children is critical to developing a sense of trust. Pre-teen children (eight to twelve year olds) are often referred to as 'tweens'. It is at this age that the child's willingness to participate in OSHC programs will be determined by how welcome and respected they feel. This will rely on having access to resources that appeal to their interests and promote acceptance in their peer group.

Temple University in Philadelphia set up MyPopStudio.com to provide girls with creative ways to look at the media...the team looked at how the site was being used they were dismayed to find that regardless of their appearance to begin with girls were choosing makeovers that made them blonde, white and thin.

Hamilton, (2008)

Did you know that?

- Global marketing expert Martin Lindstrom (BRANDchild) studied 'tweens' across eight countries suggested that over 50 % wanted to be famous.
- When British researcher Dr. Agnes Nairn studied boys and girls aged between seven and eleven the most animated discussions did not include toys and games but sports or pop stars and TV shows.

Hamilton, (2008)

Aside from moral and value based judgements, as a society we do have laws that guide how we develop a responsible media use policy and to guide the choice of materials. The most prominent being the media classification rules. The Office of Film and Literature Classification oversees the content in films, books, magazines, advertising and computer games in accordance with the Classifications Act amended by the Federal Government in 2005. Regulation of free-to-air radio and television, pay TV, digital broadcasting and Internet content in Australia is monitored by Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). Recorded music in Australia is monitored by the Australian Record Industry Association (ARIA). Warning stickers are attached to material with potentially offensive lyrics. These tools are provided to inform adults and help them to make wise choices in the media they choose to share with children. These classification guidelines should be treated with the same regard you would give to safety classifications or the age restrictions applied to toys. In cases where the music children want to listen to contains offensive themes or language, compromises can be made. Most popular music has a 'radio edit' version. Record companies make these versions to protect the financial investment they make in recording artists. After all it is in their best interests to have a version that can be played on the radio this encourages to encourage more people to pay for the music.

It is important that those responsible for the operation of OSHC programs keep up with all legislation that affects their service. It is important that they inform all staff of any changes that will impact on the way media and popular culture is used in the OSHC program. Ongoing professional development can include hypothetical scenarios to help staff define appropriate practice.

For example:

Would you allow children to watch the news every afternoon in the OSHC program?

Would you allow them to watch it if a significant event was being featured? What is a 'significant event'?

Would you allow them to watch it if a sporting event was featured?

Role of OSHC management:

- Regularly update knowledge of media regulations and laws
- Involve families in the development of OSHC philosophy and policies that define the use of media and popular culture in the program.

It is important that OSHC staff regularly have discussions within their team. Not only does this help to get to know each other but also provides a basis for more consistent responses to children's requests and expectations.

It is also important that staff use their knowledge of the children in their care to guide the purchase and use of materials used in the program.

Role of OSHC Staff:

- Be aware of own prejudices and bias
- Facilitate discussions with children about the images and messages they see in popular culture. Provide opportunities to document their thoughts, feelings and ideas.
- View internet sites, programs, images and music prior to including in the program.
- Actively monitoring all resources that are used.
- Consult families and confirm consent before introducing media into the program.
- Acknowledge and respect children's experience and knowledge. Include them in the processes for including the media and popular culture into the program

The use of popular culture also provides an opportunity for staff to share some of their life with the children in their care. Staff who share their experiences with children promote a sense of respect and trust. Staff are also well placed to help children make sense of the popular culture they encounter and articulate their thoughts and feelings.

It is important that OSHC staff take responsibility for the messages children are being exposed to. So now we are going to look at how popular culture can be used to promote positive images of diversity.

Parents have a right and responsibility to talk about their values and beliefs. Staff, parents and children all have valuable information to share about popular culture materials. Parents need

all of the information they can get when making decisions about how and when their child will be exposed to popular culture images.

### Role of Parents

- Talk to OSHC staff about the values, beliefs and preferences that dictate their child's exposure to the media and popular culture.
- Make informed decisions on what is suitable for their children.

The Commonwealth Government (2008) has made a commitment that every child will have computers and access to the internet at school. The internet can be a valuable tool however it also has the capacity to place children in danger. To protect children block access to sites that staff have not approved. When staff collaborates with children and actually engage in the activities of children, the potential for harm is reduced. Like any interaction with children there is an art to knowing how much to intervene without taking over the child's play. The opportunity to observe staff modelling the correct use of the internet and discussing the issues involved is a valuable learning experience for children. Software is available that will assist staff to monitor and refuse access to potentially dangerous websites.

Advances in technology have also resulted in the evolution of bullying. Cyber Bullying is becoming an increasing issue for school aged children and it is important that OSHC staff work together with teachers to develop consistent Cyber Bullying policies. It is important to consider the implications of allowing children to use social networking sites Eg MySpace, Facebook or YouTube. The use of mobile phones in the OSHC program should also be considered when developing any Cyber Bullying policy.

*For more information on Cyber Bullying and developing policies:*

*<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/safety/bullying/cyber/policy.htm>*

The time available to OSHC staff to investigate websites is limited. The administration and programming for tasks for OSHC services already places huge demands of staff.

Popular culture not only holds a mirror to our society it can be used to facilitate discussions about diversity and to help children develop empathy for others. For example I would like to reflect on two films that have been popular over the past two years, Happy Feet and Hairspray. The following are some examples of conversations that could occur with children after viewing these films.

What can we learn from Happy Feet?

- "It's just not penguin" Memphis

When Mumbles' father Memphis is forced to accept that his son does not have the same skills as others in his community he is dismayed. Describing Mumbles ability to express himself through dance as " ...Just not penguin". Two important issues are raised in this scene: does being part of a community rely on being the same? How does it feel when someone is disappointed in you?

- Has anyone ever tried to fix you?

Mumbles parents try everything to help him find his voice, which would make him fit in with the other penguins. How would you feel if someone tried to stop you from doing something you are good at? Should we try to fix people who are different to us? Should Mumbles parents be proud that he is different?

- How does it feel excluded?

Throughout the film Mumble finds himself being rejected by his father, peers and community. How does it feel when you are left out? What can you do to help people who are being left out?

What can we learn from talking about Hairspray?

- Should people who are different have different rules?

Two strong examples of discrimination are represented in this film: physical appearance and race. The film challenges the values and rules put into place by a fictional community in Baltimore. Tracey overcomes prejudice and gets to be on television and she also successfully takes a step towards integrating her black peers into the mainstream community. Children will be faced with issues like this in their lives and this film provides a safe medium that OSHC staff can use to initiate conversations about fairness and exclusion.

- Have you ever been judged by how you look, not what you do?

It is common to hear people say “it’s what’s inside that counts” but in Western society the reality often the opposite. The media, advertisers and our peers constantly provide us with examples of the ‘ideal’ person which is a composite of physical appearance, material possessions and lifestyle. Children see these images and this feeds their desire to fit in. Developing a self awareness is an important component of social and emotional development. Facilitating discussions about body image provides a forum for giving children realistic expectations of themselves and others.

- What can we do if someone is being bullied or left out?

For many, peer pressure and bullying is an inescapable part of growing up. This film provides an excellent example that not only the bully has the power to stop the victimization. In several scenes only one person is instigating the victimization but many more look on. The response of the group plays an important part in the power bully’s have. Children who are not being a bully or bullied still play a part in the victimization taking place. They can choose to say nothing, to support the bully or the victim. Each person plays an important part in what will occur as a result of the bullying. OSHC childcare is its own community; staff has a role as do all of the children. Conversations can be initiated about how and why the members of this community can intervene when persecution or bullying is taking place. This knowledge will be a critical tool children can use to empathize with their peers and can contribute to children treating each other with more compassion.

Both of these films also make valid points about the danger of stereotypes as each of their protagonists strive to have their unique styles respected and accepted. Popular culture also provides OSHC programs with an opportunity to challenge racial stereotypes. Racial

stereotypes, even those that are intended to be taken as compliments can be very damaging to the child's self esteem and to their knowledge of cultures other than their own. Consider the children in your care. Are all of the Asian Australian children studious over achievers; are their parent's 'workaholics' who have no time for leisure activities? Is it fair to assume that all African Americans are good at sport or do hip-hop? While some of these characteristics may seem like positive attributes the message they send can be a negative one. These generalisations can lead to resentment and frustration from the children who fit into those ethnic groups. OHSC staff can facilitate interactions that will encourage children to look beyond stereotypes and what is seen as typical and move onto a greater understanding of the unique individuals that make up our community.

Most adults will not always be comfortable with popular culture but it is not going away. How we use popular culture will help to the shape the values and beliefs of the society that our children and grandchildren will grow up in. It is a powerful tool that OSHC staff can utilise to support children to develop into compassionate and responsible adults.

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