

From *Journal of Popular Television* (volume 3, number 2, 2015)

Something special: Care, pre-school television and the dis/abled child

Amy Holdsworth, University of Glasgow

Abstract

Through a close reading of the series *Something Special* (BBC 2003-), this article explores the implicit and explicit rhetorics of 'care' within the remit and content of the UK pre-school children's channel, CBeebies. In the channel's address to an audience that includes disabled children and children with special educational needs CBeebies is celebrated as an inclusive site of play and learning for its diverse audience of 0–6-year-olds. In *Something Special* (2003–), for example, Mr Tumble's playful encounters with the world around him are supported through the use of Makaton, a sign language designed to help both children in the early stages of language development and those with communication disorders.

In the channel's emphasis on learning, development and 'care', this article questions the ways in which the disabled child both challenges and reinforces understandings of childhood and development. By exploring the manifestations of touch, texture, performance, play and repetition within this programme, it explores this inclusive mode of address for what it reveals about forms of intersubjectivity and non-verbal modes of communication.

Keywords

pre-school

disability

care

development

childhood

texture

touch

Bubbles scurry up a blue water lamp. The mirrored squares of a disco ball reflect small tiles of light across a room. A close-up of projected red, pink and purple stars float on an interactive play mat. Inside this sensory room at Robin House, a children's hospice in Balloch, Scotland, children's television presenter Rory sits alongside Abbie and her siblings, Robyn and Sean. Nestled between them, is the subject of the programme *My Pet and Me* (2014–), a small black and white therapy dog called Kerri.

Kerri loves this room, so we are told, as she chases the stars across the floor. The hands of Robyn and then Rory and Sean wave across and pat the interactive mat as the stars respond to the movement and scatter to reveal a photograph of Kerri. But this is also a 'special room for Abbie to play in'. Abbie is a young girl with profound cognitive and physical disabilities. She cannot walk or talk, has limited control over her movements and needs oxygen to regulate her breathing.¹ Propped up by a pillow in a low blue armchair with a fleece blanket over her legs, her long red hair cascades down her side. We cut to a close-up of Abbie; Kerri now sits on her knee having

‘come up for some hard-earned cuddles’. The camera tilts down to focus on the dog as Abbie’s sister Robyn takes her hand and helps her to gently stroke the contented animal (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Hands together, Abbie and Robyn stroke Kerri the dog. ‘Therapy Dog’, *My Pet and Me* (2014).

Within this short sequence there are various layers of touch and texture: the different sources of light that animate the sensory room, the emphasis on hands that scatter stars or join together to stroke the soft fur of the small dog. It is these displays of touch and texture that are central to the particular vision of pre-school television offered by CBeebies, the BBC’s digital channel for 0–6-year-olds and their parents and carers. Interviewed in 2010, controller of the channel Kay Benbow commented: ‘I want CBeebies to be accessible and tangible, as if the audience can *touch* it, so that it is part of their lives, a positive thing’ (Brown 2010, emphasis added). CBeebies offers a range of programming that provides a distinctive sensory and kinaesthetic engagement with the world that is led by the ‘philosophy of learning through play’ (BBC Commissioning 2015). This is a philosophy that aligns with multi-sensory, tactual and kinaesthetic learning styles of early years’ education and the child’s exploration and manipulation of the world through sand, water, dough and clay play for instance. Beyond this pedagogical branding, the demonstrations of touch and texture, as illustrated by the above sequence, point towards two related areas of enquiry that this article seeks to explore. First, the implicit and explicit rhetorics of ‘care’ within the remit and content of CBeebies that combine institutional directives

with their textual manifestations. Second, the forms of intersubjectivity and non-verbal modes of communication that address the child with and without disabilities.

As the title suggests, this article will focus on the BAFTA award-winning series *Something Special* (2003–), which, in its address to and representation of children with ‘special needs’ has become a flagship programme for CBeebies as an inclusive site of learning and play.² Produced by Allan Johnston, who has a background in special needs education, the series is presented by Justin Fletcher. Fletcher also stars within the programme as both his clown alter ego, Mr Tumble, and as a range of other characters within the fictional world of Tumbleton. The programme’s principal innovation could be seen to be its use of Makaton – a language programme or system that uses signs, symbols and speech to assist in the development of communication skills. Whilst attending to the programme’s use of Makaton and the structure it has devised for teaching the system, I will explore the manifestations of touch, texture, performance, play and repetition within the series to think through its address to and representation of the child with cognitive and sensory disabilities. In Lily Dyson’s study of kindergarten children in Canada and their attitudes to peers with disabilities, she concludes that in her sample of children their understanding of disability was dominated by perceptual information. Disability is marked for these children by the difference in appearance (specifically in relation to the use of special equipment, i.e. wheelchairs) and by an ‘inability to play’ (2005: 102).³ Such observations might be situated in relation to Dan Goodley and Katherine Runswick-Cole’s attention to discourses of disablement and their consequences for the disabled child – here is the ‘assumption that disability as deficit equals deficient, lacking or absent play’ (2010: 502). Significantly, for its child audience of varying needs and abilities, a format like *Something Special* insists upon the enjoyment, fun

and playfulness of its young participants, offering a representation of the disabled child that is radically different from the sentimental and paternalist address of the 'poster child'.

A child in need is a child indeed

'Let me tell you about Emily. She is 7 years old and has a condition commonly known as brittle bones'. Aston, from the former UK boy band JLS, introduces the viewer to 'Emily's Story' – a campaign video from the 2011 edition of the BBC's annual charity telethon *Children in Need* (1980–). A plaintive piano track is heard over a montage of family photographs of Emily as a baby and toddler as Aston continues his story of her journey from birth, through pain and broken bones, to where she is now. All the while Emily's vulnerability and fragility is emphasized: 'just the simplest of things, even moving her legs off the sofa, can cause a break. She's learnt to live with her pain'. Aston's narration is intercut with a series of close-up interviews with Emily. She looks young for her age, wide eyed with blonde hair, her frame is slight and her limbs shortened by her condition. In her own words, she explains what brittle bones disease means, the medicines she takes and how she tries to protect her parents from their worry and concern.

In a change of scene the piano score is replaced by JLS's upbeat Pop/R&B hit 'Everybody in Love' as the young celebrity comes to meet Emily in her home and they dance to the hit song. Aston's voice-over informs the viewer that 'your money means Emily gets the care she needs'. Support workers and specialist wheelchairs increase her independence and mobility, and this previously fragile child is seen whizzing around in her power wheelchair and cheekily recalling bashing into

doorways and furniture, and leaving cracks in the paintwork. One final change of tone and the video reverts back to the plaintive score. Slow motion footage of Emily playing and laughing is accompanied by a reminder of her inspirational attitude and Aston's final plea: 'Other children like Emily need your help. So please call and donate now. Make a difference'. The video ends, paused on the close-up of Emily smiling.

The telling of Emily's tale is a familiar, formulaic one. Individual stories of adversity and tragedy are transformed through the power of charity (and musical score) to offer messages of resilience, inspiration and hope (often hanging in the balance and relying upon the continued charity of the viewer to fund various projects and initiatives). These short films, rarely more than five-minutes long, must evoke sympathy and prompt action through a condensed narrative that sentimentalizes the past and worries over the future of the child. As Clare Barker writes – 'the disabled child generates a desire for a story by inviting speculation about both causality ('how did this disability happen?') and futurity and development ('what happens next to this child?')' (2012: 12). Here, unlike Abbie who is just a child who needs a bit of 'extra care', the child's diagnosis is central to the story, mediated through their own (if they can speak) or the families' experience and documented via family photographs.

The campaign child or 'poster child' is perhaps the predominant image of disabled childhoods offered by television.⁴ These are images of disabled children for an *adult* audience, designed to evoke pity and mobilize paternal feelings. They are images that remain central to a 'visual rhetoric' of disability that, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues, emphasizes the sentimental and operates 'on a model of paternalism, often trafficking in children' (2002: 63). Care, in the context of this paternalistic mode allows 'the nondisabled to act as the protectors, guides, leaders,

role-models, and intermediaries for disabled individuals who, *like children*, are often assumed to be helpless, dependent, asexual, economically unproductive, physically limited, emotionally immature, and acceptable only when they are unobtrusive' (Hahn 1986: 130, emphasis added).

This alignment between specific ideologies of disability and childhood is indicative of the infantilization of people with disabilities but it also presents a curious bind for the representation of the disabled child. For the disabled child, the qualities of childhood are doubled or intensified, evoking in the adult viewer 'a sense of our own potency, a reassurance of adult capacities' (Burman 1994: 35). Yet the disabled child also interrupts or disrupts another predominant vision of childhood that is preoccupied by the idea of the 'future adult'. I will return to this notion below.

For the *Children in Need* campaign films, care for the disabled child is understood within the context of a paternalist rhetoric of charity that emphasizes the child's dependency on the adult. Whilst characters from pre-school television have been deployed in the service of charity – for example, the *Teletubbies* (1997–2001) 2007 campaign for 'Autism Speaks' and 'Cure Autism Now' – CBeebies offers a different rhetoric of care that addresses the child audience and by extension, their parents and carers. With a specific remit to 'reflect a wide mix of children and presenters in terms of disability, gender and ethnicity' (BBC Trust 2015), CBeebies' 'duty of care' as a public service provider can be understood through its recognition of and responsibility for particular audiences and the inclusivity of its address. Within the context of public service broadcasting there is a clear tradition of 'an explicit philosophy of caring and nurturing' (Messenger Davies 1995: 17) that, as both Marie Messenger Davies and Jeanette Steemers (2010: 27) argue, begins with the launch of the BBC's *Play School* (1964–1988) in 1964, and its emphasis on the 'pro-social

goals' of early years' education and development.⁵ Here, the theoretical link between a notion of care and the nurturing of pro-social behaviours might be made more explicit. For example, Joan Tronto's 'phases of caring' allows us to think through the duty of care as part of dynamic caring process of giving and receiving. Her systematic approach identifies four distinct phases: 'caring about' and 'taking care of' refer to the recognition of an identified need and the assumption of a responsibility to meet that need (1993: 106). 'Care-giving' and 'care-receiving' refer to the direct meeting of these care needs and the reception and response of the object of care (1993: 107). For CBeebies, the duty of care is extended to the level of content and address.

My Pet and Me, for example, revolves around images of care-giving and receiving in the interactions between child and animal (feeding, cleaning, grooming, stroking), and which include the importance of self-care (with the closing song, for example, reminding viewers to wash their hands after playing with their pets). Within the caring process articulated through the programme, and returning to the scene of Abbie, Robyn and Kerri, what we also witness, through the displays of touch and texture, is a 'circuit of care' between the programme's participants, that is also refreshingly non-hierarchical. In this sequence, the animal 'trained to visit children who need extra care and cuddles' is cared for by that same child (where Robyn, in caring for her sister, aids Abbie in the provision of the animal's care). Care, in this context, acknowledges the importance of an interdependence between the programme's participants.⁶ As Tronto argues, by placing care as an integral rather than a peripheral concern, we will need to 'rethink our conceptions of human nature to shift from the dilemma of autonomy or dependency to a more sophisticated sense of human interdependence' (1993: 101).

‘Growing up’ with CBeebies?

Television aimed at an early years’ audience (and their carers) offers a particular emphasis on learning and development that is less visible in programmes for the school-aged audience, for whom formal education is provided elsewhere. Age, according to James and Prout, is ‘the main scaffolding around which western conceptions of childhood are built’ (1997: 232). As a structuring principle it allows the child’s development to be measured against an ‘age grade’ or ‘class’ (1997: 233) and orientated towards the child’s future as an adult. An illustration of this ‘ages and stages’ approach can be found in the classification of information on the CBeebies Grown-Ups website (2015). Here, the support for parents and carers is categorized, via the tabs at the top of the page, into the age class of the child – ‘baby’, ‘toddler’, ‘pre-school’, ‘school’ – and the content provided correlates with the stage of development and encourages the ‘grown-up’ to participate in nurturing the child through their developmental milestones; learning to crawl, walk, talk, read and write.⁷ Developmental psychologist Erica Burman has argued that the emphasis on such milestones

[...] structures mothers’ observations of their offspring, such that they worry about the rate of progress, and induce competition between parents by inviting comparisons between children, reflecting the structuring of ‘normal development’ as measurable through the ranking of individuals. Development thus becomes an obstacle race, a set of hoops to jump through, with cultural kudos accorded to the most advanced, and the real or imagined penalties of professional intervention or stigmatisation if progress is delayed. Small

wonder, then, at the marginalised position of ‘learning disabled’ children and their families. (2008: 79)

There is an additional classification on the website: ‘special needs’. Whilst providing welcome and visible support, in this context, it exists outside of the progressive time of childhood.

Drawing a parallel between childhood studies and disability studies, Kay Tisdall argues that ‘the marginalisation, institutionalisation and familialisation of children and of disabled people have had certain historical and current similarities’. The potential of these disciplines is in how they might suggest theoretical and practical reconsiderations of “normality”, competency, independence and dependency’ (2012: 183). In bringing together discourses of childhood and disability within the context of pre-school television, the representations of and address to the disabled child can be seen to both intensify *and* disrupt the norms of early years’ development. Out of time or step with their contemporaries, how does the child with disabilities point towards an acknowledgement that, as Kathryn Bond Stockton has written, ‘there are ways of growing that are not growing up’ (2009: 11)?

Though adopting different points of focus or theoretical and disciplinary touchstones there is an evocative body of literature that challenges the dominant frameworks of development across the life course (see Hockey and James 1993; James and Prout 1997; Lee 2001; Burman 2008; Uprichard 2008; Bond Stockton 2009; Solomon 2014). This is work that questions an enlightenment model of subjectivity as a unidirectional growth towards the rational and autonomous adult citizen – the ‘grown-up’, presumably, of the CBeebies website. How does the child

with disabilities, then, challenge the assumed movement from dependence to independence of the ‘typically’ developing child in their progression to ‘adulthood’? Bond Stockton’s ruminations on the queer child are suggestive of different directions of movement or growth that correlate with developmental terms associated with cognitive disabilities. For example, ‘delay’, she writes, ‘calls us into notions of the horizontal – what spreads sideways – or sideways and backwards – more than a simple thrust toward height and forward time’ (2009: 4). These alternative movements draw our attention to other identities and modes of development. But, what haunts Bond Stockton’s use of delay, and this potential alignment between the queer and the disabled child, is a notion of ‘retardation’ as the act or result of delaying and a pejorative term used to refer to people with cognitive and intellectual disabilities. There are problems that emerge here, specifically in relation to how disability complicates theoretical models of the child as ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ (see Uprichard 2008). For example, there is the danger of the continued infantilization of the child with disabilities that does not ‘grow up’ in the conventional sense, but also the very real anxieties regarding the disabled teenager’s ‘readiness’ for the transition from child to adult services. As Lee writes, it is still hard to think of children changing [or not changing] over time without accepting the terms of the dominant framework’ (2001: 136).

Learning from Bond Stockton, we might challenge the linearity of this framework by placing care as an integral concern. There is a different pattern of movement that is suggested by Tronto’s shift from the ‘dilemma of autonomy or dependency’ to the ‘more sophisticated sense of human interdependence’. What emerges is not just a horizontal or sideways movement but a repetitive motion of give and take, back and forth, that is exhibited in the ‘circuit of care’. What I move on to

suggest is how the rhythmic and repetitive features of *Something Special*, that are employed to mediate both the child's tactual experience of the world and the development of pre-verbal and non-verbal communication skills,⁸ are illustrative of such movements that shuttle or oscillate between child participant and adult presenter, and between off-screen (including the world of the viewer) and on-screen space.

Something Special

In Alexia Smit's work on television's mediation of the body she illustrates the dominance of the medium's sensory, embodied and performative approach to learning through examples of television science. Here, she writes, our 'audio-visual engagement primes other embodied sensory responses to the object [on-screen] allowing an understanding of things like texture, resistance, weight and temperature' (2010: 99). There has long been an overt tactility to pre-school television: Bagpuss, the saggy old cloth cat (*Bagpuss*, 1974), the thumbprint visible on the plasticine Morph in *Take Hart* (1977–1983), the squeaking of soap on skin as Makka Pakka washes his friends' faces in *In the Night Garden* (2007–). In this context, television's sensual capacities are deployed in the service of the embodied and experiential forms of learning that are designed to stimulate the early years' child. Here, I argue, CBeebies' kinaesthetic, sensory and tactual engagement with the world is central to both its pedagogical remit and the inclusivity of its layered mode of address to the child with and without cognitive and sensory disabilities.

For example, in an episode from the first series of *Something Special*, the programme visits the children of Oakleigh School as they play in their sensory garden. The children, a variety of ages and all with severe and complex learning difficulties,

are guided through the garden by a team of teachers and carers. Presenter Justin Fletcher's voice-over narrates the scene, drawing the audiences' attention to the sensory experiences of the children. There are 'things to hear' (the ringing of a bell, thin chains brushing against one another, a bubbling water fountain). There are 'things that are smooth and wet to touch' (stones taken from the fountain) and 'things that are rough to touch' (the bark of a tree). The children's reactions to the garden – their laughter, curiosity, excitement – are emphasized alongside the variety of colours, sights, smells, textures and temperatures, designed to stimulate both their play and sensory needs.

The experiences of touch, of sensing and exploring the world, offer the programme-maker a particular focus on hands as central to both embodied modes of learning and non-verbal forms of communication and storytelling. In *Something Special*, Justin and his alter-ego Mr Tumble's playful encounters with the world around them are supported through the use of Makaton, a system of hand signs and symbols designed to help both children in the early stages of language development and those with communication disorders. The expressivity and intimacy of hands and their gestural range are part of the language of the programme in both formal and informal ways.

To perform the Makaton sign for 'friends' you place one hand over the other (as if to shake your own hand). It is a sign used regularly in *Something Special* as in each episode Justin heads off to meet his new friend(s). In 'Baking' we are introduced to two friends – Tansy and Isla – standing behind a kitchen work surface with matching pink chef hats and aprons, their hands working away at two messy piles of biscuit dough. We cut to a close-up of Isla's hands as she picks sticky clots of paste off her fingers (see Figure 2). Justin enters the frame and leans onto the table making

himself the same height as the girls. His palm upright and flat, he signs 'hello' to them whilst vocalizing the greeting at the same time – 'Hey, hello!', he beams and the girls reciprocate. Isla raises her sticky hands up to her face and wiggles her fingers, waving back at Justin.

Figure 2: Isla kneads biscuit dough in 'Baking', *Something Special: Out and About*.

After introducing the girls to the viewer and finding out what they are making, Justin turns to them and asks 'what's this?'. 'Deh', Isla softly sounds.⁹ 'I see, it's dough!', Justin addresses the camera whilst his hands sign the word. In many of the Makaton signs deployed in the programme there is a visual relationship to the referent, with the simulation of an action often referring to the object itself. For example, the sign for 'dough' simulates the fingers kneading the material. To perform the sign for 'rolling pin', you stretch your fingers out from the palms as if the rolling pin were beneath them.¹⁰ The camera cuts from Justin signing 'dough' to the close-up of Tansy's hands vigorously kneading the biscuit mixture. It returns to Justin who repeats the sign whilst explaining the purpose of kneading (so the mixture will stick together). Justin asks if he can have a go, and we cut once again to the hands in close-up – this time with Justin's fingers pressing into the increasingly overworked dough. At this point the sensation of the dough is expressed through language as well as sight as Justin asks: 'What does this feel like Isla? It feels squidgy, yeah?'.

The structure of *Something Special* relies on duplication and repetition to produce a pattern of learning and storytelling that combines and repeats action, sign,

word and symbol: a system that is then tied into an embodied encounter with the activity. Each episode of *Something Special: Out and About* is structured around three ‘special things’ related to the theme of the episode. In an opening sequence Mr Tumble (Justin Fletcher’s clown character) places framed pictures of the three objects in what he refers to as his ‘spotty bag’.¹¹ Directed by a child’s voice-over he addresses the viewer to help him perform the magic needed to send the bag to Justin (take your finger, touch your nose, blink three times and off it goes). The magical routine is then re-performed through inserts of children with special needs acting as proxies for the viewer at home.

I want to return to the episode ‘Baking’ to further illustrate the function of the repetitive structure of the programme. After kneading the dough Justin proclaims that ‘we need something to help us roll the dough out’. Here the first ‘special thing’ is revealed from Mr Tumble’s spotty bag. It’s a picture of a rolling pin. Justin prompts both the girls and the viewer at home: ‘what’s this?’. ‘It’s a rolling pin’. Justin and the girls all point off-screen: ‘Let’s look for the rolling pin over there!’. A moving insert reveals the implement in close-up as Justin’s voice-over prompts the viewer to action – ‘the rolling pin is somewhere near, when you see it wave and cheer’. We cut to a two-shot of Tansy and Isla waving and cheering. Justin’s voice-over continues – ‘the girls have seen the rolling pin. Can you see the rolling pin? Yes, there’s the rolling pin!’ – as the still close-up of the pin reappears on the screen. This rhythmic and repetitive game of find and seek sets up a system of turn-taking between Justin, the on-screen child and the viewer at home.¹² Having identified and located the object it is now ‘time to sign’. Justin is now filmed on his own in a mid shot in the corner of the kitchen. A ping alerts Justin to the appearance of an image of the rolling pin in the top left hand corner of the screen. With the index fingers of his right hand he points

from his eye to the image – ‘Ah, look!’. He then performs the sign for rolling pin whilst speaking the words (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Justin performs the sign for ‘rolling pin’ in ‘Baking’, *Something Special: Out and About*.

Figure 4: Tansy and Isla rolling out biscuit dough in ‘Baking’, *Something Special: Out and About*.

Pointing to the camera he warmly instructs the viewer – ‘You sign’, and repeats the sign and words. Once again, there are inserts of two young children against a plain white and spotty background signing and speaking the words ‘rolling pin’ whilst Justin’s voice-over admires their efforts (‘That’s great Praise!’, ‘Thanks Jamal’). We return to Justin in the corner of the kitchen. The photograph of the rolling pin is now replaced by the Makaton symbol (a simple black outline of a rolling pin on a white background). ‘Ah look!’, Justin repeats again, and performs the sign for the final time before we cut back to Tansy and Isla using their rolling pins to roll out the dough (see Figure 4).¹³

I’ve described this sequence at length as this routine is performed for each of the three special things in each episode of the series. This highly repetitive structure, the find and seek game and the repetitive performance of the signs, is clearly designed to aid the development of the child’s receptive (to recognize objects and the words and signs for them) and expressive language (to speak and sign those words). According to Sheehy and Duffy, Makaton was designed as a developmental

vocabulary that offered a ‘controlled method of teaching approximately 350 signs [...] it aimed to provide a basic means of communication, encourage speech wherever possible and develop an understanding of language via visual signs’ (2009: 92). Yet, the introduction of Makaton into special needs education was accompanied by a series of anxieties as to whether the sign and symbol system enabled or hindered speech. The concerns outlined in Sheehy and Duffy’s study of teacher’s attitudes towards the system highlight the continued privileging of the voice and speech as a marker of both the child’s agency and their effective development. As Fletcher himself has remarked – ‘It’s crucial we carry on making that show [*Something Special*] because it gives kids a *voice*. There aren’t enough programmes for children or adults with special needs’ (McCaffrey 2012, emphasis added).¹⁴

The end goal of ‘giving voice’ to a community of children places those children back within a dominant framework that, as Cary Wolfe reminds us, relies upon the all too ‘rapid assimilation of the questions of subjectivity, consciousness, and cognition to the question of language ability’ (2008: 111), and where the ‘focus on the voice as a marker of agency excludes other forms of communication’ (Tisdall 2012: 185). Makaton, and its employment in *Something Special* as a combination of sign (action), symbol (image) and word (speech and hearing), can be seen to nurture non-verbal forms of communication with the view to aiding the child’s development of speech and spoken language. Here, the repetitive structure is utilized as a mnemonic and accumulative style of learning. However, there is something else happening in this sequence that I’ve yet to describe. Whilst I’ve focused on its structure I want to turn my attention to aspects of performance and the interaction between Justin (as presenter) and the children on-screen. I return to the expressivity of

hands, gesture and movement as central to patterns of behaviour and other modes of communication and agency expressed by the child participants of *Something Special*.

Both Justin and the format of the programme are clearly well known by the child participants.¹⁵ Ethan rocks with delight and clutches his hands in excitement ('Motor Home'). A slightly more reserved Om smiles widely and silently, and gently places his arm around Justin's shoulder ('Space'). These first on-screen meetings between Justin and his 'friends' are expressive of the child's familiarity and intimacy with the television programme and its presenter. In these encounters, Justin's performance is fundamental; for example, he often kneels, leans or crouches to ally himself with the child and encourage the sense of intimacy. What these first encounters demonstrate and what the children go on to express is a different kind of literacy.

Following Justin's turn at kneading the dough, Tansy spots the 'spotty bag' around Justin's shoulder, and she throws her arm across Isla to reach the strap shouting 'dotty bag, dotty bag', her fingers itching to get her hands on it. Responding to and carefully managing Tansy's reactions, Justin, addressing both Tansy and the viewer, replies: 'You're right Tansy, we need something to help us roll the dough out and I think we should look – inside – Mr–Tumble's – spotty – bag'. Justin pauses between each word at the end of the sentence giving time for the girls to join in with the familiar phrase. Tansy remains one step ahead; looking off-screen to the right, she's clearly already spotted the 'something special'. Eager for the routine to progress she rubs her hands together and claps in excitement, then, once again throws her arm across Isla while reaching into the bag and proclaiming 'Ah-de-it, Ah-de-it'. Justin is already pulling out the first picture as Tansy grasps it from him to hold up to the camera. 'What's this?', Justin asks and the irrepressible Tansy replies at lightning

speed: 'rolling pin'. Then she throws her arm out to what she spotted earlier and shouts 'thheerree!' Justin chuckles to the camera: 'I think she's got it already. Let's look for a rolling pin over – there'. 'Thheerree', Tansy shouts one more time, wildly gesticulating to the rolling pin off-screen.

In her familiarity with the format of *Something Special*, Tansy, now it is in *her* world, is impatient for the set routines to play out. Justin, as presenter, has to negotiate the excitement of this young girl with the careful mnemonic rhythm and pacing of the repetitive routines (that have allowed Tansy to remember them in the first place). Particular qualities of the programme become evident in this push and pull between Tansy and Justin that would not necessarily be apparent if the description of the programme focused only on its educational structure and intent. Here, I am not reading Tansy's eagerness as a 'showing off' but as an 'exuberance and apparent lack of self-consciousness' that is often prized in the child performer (see Lury 2010: 150). Rather than editing out Tansy's interruptions, they are valued by *Something Special* and its representation of the child with special needs. For the series, children with disabilities are first and foremost children, and the programme foregrounds their child-like qualities, whether disruptive (like Tansy) or gently compliant (like Isla), in their spontaneous reactions to Justin and the performance and structure of the set routines.

What this example is illustrative of is the continuous back and forth in the interactions between the child participant and Justin as presenter, that is also evident in the repetitive structure of the programme: between on-screen and off-screen space in the find and seek game, in the turn taking between Justin, the child participants and the child at home. In some senses Justin is the locus of these lateral movements, mediating between the frame of the programme and the performance of the child, and

between the on-screen world and the world of the viewer. The give and take that this motion indicates might be extended to how the programme positions Fletcher as both 'adult' and 'child'. For example, Fletcher's own physiognomy – his 'doughy' face, small round features, dimples and twinkling blue eyes – are central to the sense of his own 'boyishness'. As Mr Tumble, his child-like, clownish incompetence is emphasized by the child's voice-over, which, not unlike the voice of mother in *Andy Pandy* (1952), takes a maternal, guiding role, reminding and instructing the man-child character. In Bond Stockton's challenge to the notion of 'growing up' (that implies an end to growth when full stature is achieved) she argues instead how: "Growing sideways" suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing "adults" and "children" into lateral contact' (2009: 11). While this allows us to think about growth in terms of a different directional plane, what I want to emphasize, through *Something Special*, is the significance of a related but distinctive lateral movement that shuttles to and fro, back and forth, and that speaks to the formal and experiential characteristics of (pre-school) television. The etymology of the verb 'develop' comes from the French meaning to unroll or unfold. The pattern or rhythm of television, its 'ebb and flow' (see Holdsworth 2011), allows us to challenge this unidirectional movement and reimagine it as a simultaneous folding and unfolding (or rolling and unrolling) that makes space for the child that both is and isn't changing. This movement is heightened in the highly repetitive forms of pre-school television where discourses of care are also clearly visible in the give and take between presenter and participant, programme-maker and audience.

David Oswell has remarked (with a dose of scepticism) on the 'claims of "education" and a *sense of care* for the developing child' that are continually

emphasized within both public service and commercial children's television (2002: 21, emphasis added). Whilst questioning the disabled child's troubling or interruption of developmental narratives, what this article has also begun to interrogate is what this 'sense of care' might mean and how it is both explicit and implicit within the content and address of *Something Special* and the world of CBeebies. This 'sense of care' emerges in the sustained attention to the modes of touch and texture on television, specifically through hands and gestures, that make visible the mutuality of caring relations between bodies and with the world. These embodied encounters are suggestive of the various forms of intersubjectivity offered by television, in this case, specifically through the 'tangibility' of pre-school programming. Through this mode of analysis I've also wanted to suggest how this 'sense of care' is apparent in the centrality of non-verbal modes of communication that are inclusive of differently abled audiences. This opens up the possibilities for programme-makers to cater specifically for these audiences but might also be used to challenge dominant and normative ways of thinking, seeing and sensing through screen media. This 'sense of care' is evident in the space made for disabled children on and in front of the screen when they are so often marginalized from cultural life (see Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2011: 76), and intensifies concerns regarding the ghettoization of children's television (to niche digital channels where these representations will remain invisible to other and accidental audiences). However, in the efforts of a programme like *Something Special* to avoid the paternalist and sentimental address that characterize the visual rhetorics of disability, a final 'sense of care' is missing. What remains invisible, in its primary address to the child audience, is the labour of care (the washing of sticky, dough covered hands, the 'extra care' that Abbie requires). Whilst I have emphasized particular rhythms and motions, the realities of care-giving and

receiving can be disjointed and unbalanced. In the child-centred world of *Something Special*, parents and carers exist (often silently) on the margins of the frame. Care of and for the disabled child is at once central and peripheral to the programme and is the line on which the negotiation of inclusion and difference is drawn.

References

Barker, C. (2012), *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability: The Exceptional Child*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

BBC Commissioning (2015), 'CBeebies – what we're looking for', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/commissioning/briefs/tv/browse-by-genre/cbeebies/>. Accessed 29 January 2015.

BBC Trust (2015), 'CBeebies: Current service license', http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/services/television/service_licences/cbeebies.html. Accessed 29 January 2015.

Bond Stockton, K. (2009), *The Queer Child: Or, Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Brown, M. (2010), 'Where CBeebies toddles next', *The Guardian*, 16 August, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2010/aug/16/cbeebies>. Accessed 20 February 2015.

Burman, E. (1994), 'Poor children: Charity appeals and ideologies of childhood', *Changes: An International Journal of Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 12:1, pp. 29–36.

____ (2008), *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, 2nd ed., London: Routledge.

Cartwright, L. (2008), *Moral Spectatorship: Technologies of Voice and Affect in Postwar Representations of the Child*, Durham: Duke University Press.

CBeebies (2015), 'Grown-ups – for parents and carers', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/grownups/>. Accessed 29 January 2015.

Diamond, K. E. and Kensinger, K. R. (2002), 'Vignettes from *Sesame Street*: Preschooler's ideas about children with Down Syndrome and physical disability', *Early Education and Development*, 13:4, pp. 409–22.

Diamond, K. E., Hong, S. Y. and Tu, H. (2008), 'Context influences preschool children's decisions to include a peer with a physical disability', *Exceptionality: A Special Education Journal*, 16:3, pp. 141–55.

Dyson, L. (2005), 'Kindergarten children's understanding of and attitudes toward people with disabilities', *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 25: 2, pp. 95–105.

Eisenberg, N., Fabes, R. A. and Spinrad, T. L. (2006), 'Prosocial development', in N. Eisenberg, W. Damon and R. M. Lerner (eds), *Handbook of Child Psychology: Social, Emotional, and Personality Development*, vol. 3, New York: Wiley, pp. 646–718.

Garland-Thomson, R. (2002), 'The politics of staring: Visual rhetorics of disability in popular photography', in S. L. Snyder, B. J. Brueggemann and R. Garland-Thomson (eds), *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, New York: Modern Language Association of America, pp. 56–75.

Goodley, D. and Runswick-Cole, K. (2010), 'Emancipating play: Dis/abled children, development and deconstruction', *Disability and Society*, 25:4, pp. 499–512.

____ (2011), 'Something in the air? Creativity, culture and community', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 16:1, pp. 75–91.

Hahn, H. (1986), 'Public support for rehabilitation programs: The analysis of U.S. disability policy', *Disability, Handicap and Society*, 1:2, pp. 121–37.

Hockey, J. and James, A. (1993), *Growing Up and Growing Old: Ageing and Dependency in the Life Course*, London: Sage.

Holdsworth, A. (2011), *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

James, A. and Prout, A. (1997), 'Re-presenting childhood: Time and transition in the study of childhood', in A. James and A. Prout (eds), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, London: Falmer Press, pp. 227–46.

Lee, N. (2001), *Childhood and Society: Growing Up in an Age of Uncertainty*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Longmore, P. (1997), 'Conspicuous contribution and American cultural dilemmas: Telethon rituals of cleansing and renewal', in D. T. Mitchell and S. L. Snyder (eds), *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 134–58.

____ (2013), "'Heaven's special child": The making of poster children', in L. J. Davies (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4th ed., London: Routledge, pp. 34–41.

Lury, K. (2010), *The Child in Film*, London: I. B. Tauris.

McCaffrey, J. (2012), "'Nothing beats the sound of a child's laugh": Mr Tumble star Justin Fletcher talks fame and fortune', *The Mirror*, 21 August,

<http://www.mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-news/mr-tumble-star-justin-fletcher-1271878>.

Accessed 10 February 2015.

McGown, A. (2014), 'Vision On (1964-76)', Screenonline,

<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/572564/>. Accessed 20 February 2015.

Messenger Davies, M. (1995), 'Babes 'N' the Hood: Pre-school television and its audiences in the United States and Britain', in C. Bazalgette and D. Buckingham (eds), *In Front of the Children*, London: BFI, pp. 15–33.

Oswell, D. (2002), *Television, Childhood and the Home*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sheehy, K. and Duffy, H. (2009), 'Attitudes to Makaton in the ages of integration and inclusion', *International Journal of Special Education*, 24:2, pp. 91–102.

Smit, A. (2010), 'Broadcasting the body: Affect, embodiment and bodily excess on contemporary television', Ph.D. thesis, Glasgow: University of Glasgow.

Solomon, A. (2014), *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity*, London: Vintage.

Stemmers, J. (2010), *Creating Preschool Television: A Story of Commerce, Creativity and Curriculum*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Tisdall, E. K. M. (2012), 'The challenge and challenging of childhood studies? Learning from disability studies and research with disabled children', *Children and Society*, 26: 3, pp. 181–91.

Tracey, E. (2013), 'Melody makers', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-ouch-25346648>. Accessed 20 February 2015.

Tronto, J. C. (1993), *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, London: Routledge.

Uprichard, E. (2008), 'Children as "being and becomings": Children, childhood and temporality', *Children and Society*, 22: 4, pp. 303–13.

Wolfe, C. (2008), 'Learning from Temple Grandin, or, Animal Studies, Disability Studies, and who comes after the subject', *New Formations*, 64, pp. 110–23.

Television programmes

Andy Pandy (1952, United Kingdom: BBC).

Bagpuss (1974, United Kingdom: BBC).

Children in Need (1980–, United Kingdom: BBC).

For Deaf Children (1952–1964, United Kingdom: BBC).

Gigglebiz (2009–, United Kingdom: BBC).

In the Night Garden (2007–, United Kingdom: CBeebies).

Justin's House (2011–, United Kingdom: CBeebies).

Magic Hands (2013–, United Kingdom: CBeebies).

Melody (2013–, United Kingdom: CBeebies).

My Pet and Me (2014–, United Kingdom: CBeebies).

'Therapy Dog' (Episode 12).

Play School (1964–1988, United Kingdom: BBC).

Something Special (2003–, United Kingdom: CBeebies).

'Baking' (Series 7, Episode 1).

'Motor Home' (Series 8, Episode 1).

'Space' (Series 7, Episode 5).

Take Hart (1977–1983, United Kingdom: BBC).

Teletubbies (1997–2001, United Kingdom: BBC).

Tikkabilla (2002–2007, United Kingdom: CBeebies).

Tweenies (1999–2003, United Kingdom: BBC).

Vision On (1964–1976, United Kingdom: BBC).

Contributor details

Dr Amy Holdsworth is a lecturer in Film and Television Studies in the School of Culture and Creative Arts at the University of Glasgow. She is the author of *Television, Memory and Nostalgia* (Palgrave, 2011) and has contributed articles to *Screen*, *Cinema Journal*, *Journal of British Cinema and Television* and *Critical Studies in Television*.

Contact:

Film and Television Studies, School of Culture and Creative Arts, Gilmorehill Halls,
9 University Avenue, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, G12 8QQ, UK.

E-mail: Amy.Holdsworth@glasgow.ac.uk.

Notes

¹ Significantly, the programme does not attach a diagnostic label to Abbie. She is just a child who needs a bit of ‘extra care’.

² At the time of writing there have been eight series of *Something Special* produced between 2003 and 2013. The format has been updated on several occasions as its popularity and budget grew through *Something Special: Out and About* (Series 3–7) and *Something Special: We’re All Friends* (Series 8). *Something Special* is not alone in its recognition of and provision for the child with special needs. More recent examples include *Magic Hands* (2013–) that features a team of adult performers who translate poetry into British Sign Language, whilst *Melody* (2013–) was designed to

introduce children to the world of classical music through the imagination of a partially sighted young girl. The BBC's provision for children with disabilities can be traced much further back to the series *For Deaf Children* (1952–1964), which was reimagined as *Vision On* (1964–1976). The latter series was noted for both its experimental approach and its dual address to hearing and deaf children (McGown 2014).

³ Similar conclusions can be found in other studies of pre-schooler's understandings of disability (see, e.g., Diamond and Kensinger 2002; Diamond et al. 2008).

⁴ For further discussion of the poster child see Longmore (1997, 2013).

⁵ In their chapter on 'Prosocial development' in the *Handbook of Child Psychology*, Eisenberg et al. define the term as 'voluntary behavior intended to benefit another' (2006: 646).

⁶ An interdependence that is, in the context of *My Pet and Me*, also interspecies. For a powerful discussion on the possibilities of trans-species interdependency, which also learns from Disability Studies, see Cary Wolfe's (2008) essay.

⁷ The instrumental value of play that is evident in CBeebies rhetoric of 'learning through play' points towards Goodley and Runswick-Coles' argument that play is increasingly 'codified, monitored, managed'. Here 'stages of play' tied to an educational remit are also used in the service of the grand narrative of developmental psychology (2010: 503).

⁸ The child's coming into speech and language offers a particular example of a developmental milestone that is negotiated by pre-school television, with many programmes populated by both pre-verbal and non-verbal characters. These have included child-like characters that are spoken for (Andy Pandy) or express themselves

through fantastical sounds (the Clangers), comic utterances (Morph, Pingu) or ‘baby talk’ (the Teletubbies, Baby Jake).

⁹ Once again, the girls are not ‘diagnosed’ by the programme but both have physical characteristics reminiscent of Down’s Syndrome and Isla, in particular, has a clear speech impairment, dropping vowel sounds and using basic word combinations.

¹⁰ This also explains, in part, the suitability of the clown character Mr Tumble, as Makaton becomes in the programme an extension of his clowning and use of mime.

¹¹ The three special things of the most recent iteration of the programme – *Something Special: We’re All Friends* – are accessed via three buttons on Mr Tumble’s ‘tumble tap’ (a tablet computer put in the spotty bag instead).

¹² It should be noted that this technique and the use of direct address to solicit the participation of the child at home is not unique to *Something Special* and is common across a range of pre-school programming both contemporary and historical.

¹³ In this minute-long sequence, the image of the rolling pin is seen on four occasions, the word is spoken twelve times and signed five times.

¹⁴ This correlates with Lisa Cartwright’s discussion of the deaf girl/woman’s film where speech and voice offer an ‘imagined means of emancipation into the public sphere’ (2008: 69)

¹⁵ Justin Fletcher has been a well-known performer on CBeebies since its launch in 2002. His work for BBC Children’s includes *Tweenies* (1999–2003), *Tikkabilla* (2002–2007) and more recent ‘star-vehicles’ – *Gigglebiz* (2009–) and *Justin’s House* (2011–) – that have followed the success of *Something Special*.