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PRIME MINISTER

Prime Minister 2

very pleased about the proposal for new study

Sir Keith Joseph proposes a further study of the impact of TV on children. You will be interested to see the damning conclusion of the last study at A.

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I am concerned about the impact of television on school children. Although children's television and school programmes are often of a high standard, for many children the work of the schools is probably being hampered by the content and quality of much that children view during the long hours they spend watching other programmes.

2 Television imparts knowledge, although this may be of little value to children if it is received passively and without explanation from, or discussion with, parents and other adults. But my main concern is with the influence of television upon the development of attitudes and values among the young. I am interested both in attitudes to sex and violence, which have perhaps aroused most public concern, and in the whole range of other values in our society. Much of the research evidence on the impact and influence of television is inconclusive, but it seems implausible that television should be an effective advertising medium but an ineffective vehicle in shaping attitudes in other fields.

3 I shall be promoting a modest study, making use of a small number of teachers, and based on the work that led to the attached report "Teachers and TV" which was written in 1978. This report contains a survey of the viewing habits of the children in the schools involved, the teachers' comments on a number of popular programmes and the reaction to these of the children they taught. It has some important and worrying things to say that are still valid today. But largely owing to personnel changes it had only a slight follow-up and a limited impact. It is now somewhat out of date in the programmes on which its discussion was based. Moreover it was limited to BBC programmes.

4 The further study I have in mind would be carried out by teachers from a variety of schools in cooperation with the BBC and IBA. As on the earlier occasion, HMI would play a substantial part in it. Its brief would be to view for a period of time a group of the most popular television programmes. On the basis of this it would comment on the extent to which these programmes impeded or helped the work of schools and teachers in developing positive values and attitudes in their pupils. The outcome of this work would be discussed with television officials and producers, teachers and education authorities and then published so that it became available also to parents.

5 Such an exercise will, I believe, be useful not only in helping the broadcasters to see the effect of some of their popular programmes, not least on a section of viewers whom they probably do not have in mind when they make them; but also in encouraging a more informed public debate on some very serious issues which need to be ventilated.

6 The exercise would be free-standing, as a piece of practical research. When we have the report we can also consider whether, so far as England is concerned, we should seek to build on it at the political level. For example it would be possible, in speeches or otherwise, to draw attention to what emerged from the study; to follow it up with the Chairmen of the BBC and IBA; and to encourage parents (in conjunction as necessary with the schools) to take a closer interest in what their children view and to help them, by discussion, to use it as a positive influence in the formation of values and attitudes. I will consult you and other interested colleagues when we have the report.

7 I am sending copies of this minute, and the enclosures, to the Home Secretary and to the Secretaries of State for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

KJ

8 January 1982

Department of Education and Science