

Talking to Children About Inclusion

Rise & Shine, June 2nd

Matthew 5:19

Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (For context, read 5:1-20.)

Questions:

- Do you agree with APT's decision not to air the episode? Arthur is a show geared towards young children. At what age, if any, is it appropriate to introduce children to the idea of same-sex couples?
- What is the right time to introduce children to discussions about inclusion? What about when the topic includes gender or sexual orientation?
- What are the most critical lessons that we need to teach our children from their earliest moments? How does APT's decision support or conflict with those lessons?
- What is television's role in teaching moral lessons to our children? Is this role overstated or understated?

In the News

Alabama Public Television refuses to air Arthur episode with gay wedding

Alabama Public Television chose not to air PBS's Arthur episode that included a same-sex marriage. In the episode, which aired nationwide May 13, Arthur and his friends attend their beloved teacher Mr. Ratburn's nuptials to his partner.

Mike McKenzie, director of programming at APT, said APT was notified by WGBH and PBS in mid-April about the episode titled "Mr. Ratburn and the Special Someone" and decided to show a re-run. McKenzie said APT has no

plans to air the episode at a later date. The trouble with them alerting them of the episode in advance is that it gave the indication that there was something wrong with the episode to begin with.

“Parents have trusted Alabama Public Television for more than 50 years to provide children’s programs that entertain, educate and inspire,” Mckenzie said in an email. “More importantly – although we strongly encourage parents to watch television with their children and talk about what they have learned afterwards – parents trust that their children can watch APT without their supervision. We also know that children who are younger than the ‘target’ audience for Arthur also watch the program.”

This act appears to be a repeat of a 2005 instance when APT pulled an episode of Arthur, when a character in the show visited a girl who had two mothers.

APT’s then executive director Allan Pizzato said of the incident, “Our feeling is that we basically have a trust with parents about our programming. This program doesn’t fit into that.”

Fifteen years later, and notwithstanding the Supreme Court landmark decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* requiring all states to recognize same-sex marriage, not much has changed in Alabama. Many would say that Children’s television programming is meant to educate kids about the world in which they live—and in 2019, in the United States, that world includes same-sex couples, some of whom exercise their constitutional right to marry.

Public television has not always pandered to the worst prejudices of some viewers. In 1968, in the aftermath of the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, an episode of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* aired in which Fred Rogers discussed the assassinations. “What does assassination mean?” asked Daniel, the tiger voiced by Rogers. In a 1969 episode, Rogers made a point of integrating his backyard plastic swimming pool at a time when cities like Jackson, Mississippi, were busy closing public pools in order to avoid racially integrating them. Rogers also devoted shows to other challenging contemporary social issues that can and do affect children’s lives—including death and war. In fact, Rogers came back from retirement to host a show that explained 9/11 to kids.

Fred Rogers, a lifelong member of the Republican Party, believed that educational television had to deal with difficult subjects that children were

certain to face in their ordinary lives. His show bravely tackled subjects that, for most parents, are extremely difficult to discuss.

Failing to introduce children to the idea of same-sex couples could entrap them in a veil of cultural ignorance. And, ignorance can often breed intolerance and hate. Alabama has a history fraught with bigotry and intolerance. Under current Alabama state law, public school districts offering sex education must teach that “homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public.” Moreover, despite the Supreme Court’s decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* declaring state sodomy laws to be unconstitutional, Alabama public schoolteachers must also teach their students that “homosexual conduct is a criminal offense under the laws of the state.” Thus, state law mandates the inculcation of intolerance, if not hate.

Some in Alabama regretted APT’s decision. Misty Souder, a substitute teacher in McCalla, saw the celebration of inclusion on social media and recorded the episode to watch with her 9-year-old daughter. She and her daughter were disappointed when the episode turned out to be a re-run. Souder reached out to APT and used the experience to teach her daughter about the importance of speaking out for the minority groups.

“I just want her to be aware,” Souder said. “There’s too much going on not to stand up for stuff, even if it’s Arthur. I never thought I’d be going to battle for a gay rat wedding, but here we are.”

Here are some Bible verses and a question outline to guide our discussion:

Mark 10:13-15

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

Deuteronomy 4:9

But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children—

Proverbs 22:6

*Train children in the right way,
and when old, they will not stray.*

Prayer for the Human Family (BCP p.815)

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.