

“We Can’t Do It on Our Own”:  
*Zoom* and the Empathic Potential of Child-Created Educational Television

Discussions of children and empathy often address the perceived lack or otherness of children’s empathic capabilities. Some scholars, such as Heidi Lene Maibom, claim that evoking empathy through perceptual, inferential, and imaginative experiences may require a “more advanced” level of cognitive development.

In the manifesto “Risky Business: Talking About Children in Children’s Literature Criticism,” Marah Gubar presents the valuable “kinship model” as an alternative to the damaging modes of thinking that identify adults as superior in relation to children. Gubar’s manifesto remains an integral part of the critical canon. However, most scholarship addressing the model focuses only on its application towards understanding childhood and child agency. To further this model’s scope, I argue that the kinship model can serve as a useful tool for constructing and conceptualizing the perceptual, inferential, and imaginative experiences that support a child’s development of empathy.

In this paper, I analyze segments from the children’s television show *Zoom* (1999-2005) under the critical lens of Gubar’s kinship model. During its run, *Zoom* took the radical perspective that children could create and control the educational experiences that matter most to them. Although adults were controlling the off-screen production of the show, *Zoom* centered its format around cast members participating in child-submitted jokes, crafts, recipes, and games. This view aligns with the kinship model’s idea that a child’s unique abilities should be fostered rather than dismissed as inferior to an adult’s abilities. As this paper will explore, the resulting combination of a relatable child cast leading, experiencing, and reacting to child-submitted content effectively replicated those perceptual, inferential, and imaginative experiences that develop empathy.