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Growth in Fort Myers

When it comes to children's TV ratings, WGCU in Fort Myers, Fla., is an outlier among pubTV stations. Its daytime viewership skyrocketed 44 percent in the past five years, due at least in part to its own commitment to producing a local program for kids.



The young cast of WGCU's Curious Kids romps on a beach during the show's first season in 2011. While ratings for PBS Kids' content are dropping at most public TV stations, the Fort Myers, Fla., station's ratings have grown 44 percent in the past five years. (Photo: WGCU)

cont'd next page

WGCU launched its own live-action quarterly show *Curious Kids* in March 2011. The colorful, high-spirited series explores themes of “My Self,” “My Backyard” and “My World.”

“It’s done by kids for kids,” programmer Toby Cooke said. Its young cast members “are like rock stars in their schools,” she said, with fans pestering them for autographs. WGCU has produced 13 of the half-hour episodes so far. The station debuted a new show March 8, presenting it as a double-pump at 9 and 9:30 a.m. and a repeat on Sunday morning.

Curious Kids also has its own permanent exhibit space, the *Curious Kids Exhibit* at the Golisano Children’s Museum of Naples, said Barbara Steinhoff, station communications director. It’s a room where preteens ages 8 to 12 take part in science experiments, writing, model-building and more.

The show also is part of the station’s wider *Curious Kids* initiative, which includes educational workshops for parents of elementary school kids and is built around PBS Kids content and related hands-on activities. More than 1,000 parents and 2,000 students have attended those monthly events since fall 2010, Steinhoff said.

The station’s seven-year relationship with the Lee County Library System and its Southwest Florida Reading Festival also provides visibility to its educational programs supporting families. WGCU hosts two booths during the festival, one for kids and one “for their Moms and Dads and other grown-ups,” she said. The cast of *Curious Kids* leads singalongs in a performance tent at the daylong fest, which draws as many as 20,000 participants.

“We have to believe all that is having an impact on what kids are watching,” Steinhoff said. Providing content that’s educational and engaging is the most important measure of pubTV’s service to children and families, Harris noted.

“I understand the numbers, and I like audiences, but I do think we’re doing what public television should do,” Harris said. “Parents turn to us for education. It’s the difference between ‘I’m creating friction!’ and ‘Mommy, buy me that cereal.’”

- See more at: <http://www.current.org/2014/03/pbs-mulls-strategy-to-boost-kids-ratings/#sthash.jrjsHtiT.dpuf>