

# Tipping Point Commentaries

## Writing For Children

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One of the most popular children's programs, *Sesame Street*, was improved upon by a program that seemingly changed the entire fabric of this industry. That program, *Blue's Clues*, was reported in Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point*. Gladwell writes that the program achieved its success with children through repetition. This repetition went to the seemingly point of programming suicide by showing the same program every day of the week for a week. Only after this interval was the program material changed at the beginning of a new week, and then repeated every day.

The *Blue's Clues* staff studies showed that children readily accepted, anticipated, and looked forward to this format. It conformed to their development in that they could rehearse and participate in the program's material as they became familiar with the script. Further studies showed that the children's programming model of "mixing it up" did exactly that, it mixed them up rather than entertaining or engaging the children.

Let us examine this in the terms of the tipping of the tipping point. Gladwell would certainly offer *Blue's Clues* as an example of a tipping point. He may as easily offer *Sesame Street* was also an example of a tipping point. Obviously neither negates the other, but they are distinct – aren't they? They are certainly similar, if we examine them on the basis of being programs for children's development. They both qualify as having tipped the medium of TV towards children. However, are they unique and novel in that nothing like them had ever existed before? Hardly. The question is enough to warn the reader that this would be an illusion. Trends, waves, and fashion are cyclical where what was once was old is new again.

Let's look for what was renewed when *Blue's Clues* reinvented repetition. The discovery of the tipping point of repetition was already a childhood staple in print. Dr. Seuss wrote *Green Eggs and Ham* in 1960, barely a decade before *Sesame Street*. How is this remarkable in the context of repetition? Dr. Seuss used only 50 words to write the entire book. As for it being a tipping point for its generation of readers, that is easily qualified by Dr. Seuss having sold 8 million copies of *Green Eggs and Ham*.

Thus, with the intervening style of *Sesame Street*, the model of repetition for children's intellectual development had been re-discovered after a generation and cast into a new medium.