

TV star Daniel Cook, 8, likes fame and politics, but prefers dinosaurs

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TORONTO (CP) - His TV show is a hit in Canada and the United States.

He's mobbed by fans at McDonald's and Disney World. His website offers T-shirts, clocks and bumper stickers plastered with his image. CTV even hired him to interview the federal party leaders during the recent election campaign. And Daniel Cook, of Stoney Creek, Ont., is only eight years old.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about the little red-head in the trademark orange shirt is that he doesn't seem to be one of those Hollywood-type kids.

You know, eight going on 28?

He seems to be, well, just a regular kid who happens to be the star of *This Is Daniel Cook*, seen on Treehouse TV, TVOntario, several other educational channels across Canada, and even on the Playhouse Disney channel in the U.S.

During a recent interview, he was asked which he preferred, being interviewed, or doing interviews on his own show.

"I think I'd rather be the interviewer," Daniel says after thinking about it.

"No offence!" he hastily adds for the reporter's sake. None taken.

A pilot for his show - in which Daniel tries out jobs ranging from construction work to chocolate making and disco dancing - was prepared back when the youngster was only five.

Executive producer Mark Bishop says the program filled a void.

"There's so much animation out there, which kids love and enjoy and will always be there, but (educational broadcasters wanted) role models for preschoolers being able to see themselves reflected onscreen with kids that are their own age.

"He's a role model but he's also a friend. And they all know he's Daniel Cook. That's his real name."

Bishop says Cook has to wear a hoodie and sunglasses when he goes to McDonald's and recalls one question-answer session with fans where youngsters just wanted to come up and touch him to see if he was real.

"They couldn't understand how he got out of the TV!" he says.

There was a similar reaction at Disney World last June after Daniel's show began airing on Playhouse Disney.

"Literally we had kids and parents coming up to him. 'Is that Daniel Cook? That's Daniel Cook?' And the show had only been on for two weeks!"

Cook himself appears to take it all in stride. He signs autographs and answers fan mail, but when he gets bored, he plays with his Transformer toys (or his BlackBerry) and sometimes his mom has to take him aside to get him to focus.

When he does, the results can be fascinating.

He stopped Stephen Harper in his tracks during the election campaign by asking the Conservative leader who he would vote for if he couldn't vote for himself. Harper could only mutter something about preferring to jump off a roof. Daniel swears he thought up the question all by himself.

"It was quite fun, I really liked it," the fledgling reporter says about his political assignment for CTV. "Politics, it's pretty neat, now that I've gotten to see more about what they do, I'm liking it more."

As for Harper?

"I think he'll make a pretty good prime minister, but I thought Paul Martin was doing a great job."

Season Two of This is Daniel Cook began on Treehouse in December. A second DVD compilation of previous TV episodes is scheduled for release Feb. 28.

He regrets that he's had no callbacks yet from some movie auditions, though.

Cook says he's pondering future series ideas and would especially like to do something involving his favourite pastime, dinosaurs. His favourite prehistoric lizard?

A monstrous meat-eater called the Giganotosaurus. And he can spell it, too: "g-i-g-a-n-o-t-o-s-a-u-r-u-s."

Asked if he was satisfied with the allowance he gets as a bona fide TV personality (his parents won't say how much he makes), Daniel immediately took the bait.

"I want more! You could raise it by \$200," he says turning to his nearby parents.

When it's suggested he just might be able to fire mom and dad - who works in the computer industry - his eyes widen with glee.

"OK, your interview is over!" dad declares with mock anger.