

The truth about the educational impact of TV for children

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It's a discussion which happens in most, if not all households, can TV really be educational? We hear pleas from caregivers "that's enough TV, you're going to get square eyes" and parents often feel guilt when letting their kiddies watch TV when they need a break or need to get a bit of work done.



Mari Payne, director of Education and Outreach at Sesame Workshop International

But content has changed since the inception of children's TV, developing beyond entertainment value. "While it's not advised to watch TV for extended periods of time, educational content can indeed be a productive part of a child's day, when it is in appropriate amounts and good quality, research-based programming," says Mari Payne, director of Education and Outreach at Sesame Workshop International, South Africa.

Payne explains, "Substantial research shows that Sesame Workshop's international co-productions are effective across the spectrum of critical learning areas, from literacy and math to health and social skills."

"Before anything we create makes it on screens, we do thorough research to learn about our audiences so we can develop and refine content for appeal and relevance. We then consider whether our content will have the impact we want it to have and understand under what conditions it demonstrates impact. Finally, we tell the story of our impact with data and statistics to ensure proper measurement.

Sesame Workshop's flagship show, *Sesame Street* was the first children's show to use formative research to inform show production. It has been the subject of over 1,000 studies — more than any other children's television programme — with findings that validate both our global impact and signature approach of bringing delightful and relatable learning opportunities to children wherever they learn: through TV, radio, print, online, and in the classroom," she adds. Every day around the world, Sesame Workshop delivers the academic building blocks children need at a young age.

In many countries Sesame Workshop's programs are created with the help of local educators, advisors, and producers and are tailored to meet the unique educational needs of children in each country. This often results in a coproduction: a fully local Sesame Street with its own name, language, curriculum, and characters. Locally produced educational media

should be encouraged as it can positively affect potential school success and child development. As recent studies bear out, these efforts are having a measurable impact on learning in both the short- and long- term.

While educational media can affect young children's development, rigorous studies rarely occur in low- and middle-income countries. Using an experimental design, researchers investigated the effect of an educational television series (*Galli Galli Sim Sim* (GGSS), the Indian adaptation of *Sesame Street*) with 1,340 children in 99 preschools in Lucknow, India. Boys and girls, ages three to seven and mostly from low-income households, saw 30 minutes of television five days a week for 12 weeks, varying how much *Galli Galli Sim Sim* versus other programming children watched. Assessments occurred at baseline, endline, and six weeks later. Findings showed that watching *Galli Galli Sim Sim* significantly improved literacy, numeracy, socioemotional strategies, and nutritional knowledge.

Similarly, a recent research study found that *Takalani Sesame*, South Africa's local version of *Sesame Street*, increased task persistence in children and improved children's constructive play skills, cooperation skills, and problem-solving skills. The study tested a range of episodes from Season 11 with 252 English, Zulu, and Sesotho viewing families across all 9 provinces and was completed in the end of July 2022.

After watching an episode, 80% of caregivers reported that their child set a new goal, while 70% reported that their child made a plan for achieving a new goal. In addition, caregivers were most likely to say *Takalani Sesame* had more educational content, relevance, and entertainment than other shows, especially Sotho and Zulu viewers.

Research also found that children exposed to *Takalani Sesame* showed measurable gains in HIV/AIDS knowledge and attitudes, including basic knowledge of the disease, blood safety, de-stigmatisation, and coping with illness. Those children are four times more likely to have some knowledge of HIV/AIDS, while their attitude toward de-stigmatisation of the disease improves fivefold compared to those who are not exposed³.

In Tanzania, *Kilimani Sesame* has delivered life-saving health messages to millions of Tanzanian pre-schoolers through radio, television, outreach materials, and teacher mediation. Compared to children with less exposure, those who watched *Kilimani Sesame* knew more about malaria transmission and prevention, knew more about HIV/AIDS, and had more positive attitudes towards people with HIV/AIDS⁴.

Sesame Workshop's various local adaptations of *Sesame Street* has brought together children from all walks of life and promoted the values of sharing and getting along with others. These efforts have focused on helping children grow up with a healthy self-identity and sense of belonging, in full celebration of our diverse world. In places with a history of conflict and division, studies show that our international co-productions help children find common ground.

"What began as a simple yet revolutionary idea in the United States — to teach kids through television — has grown into a worldwide educational phenomenon seen in more than 150 countries, really showcasing the fact that TV, can be educational," adds Payne.

Today Sesame Workshop International reaches over 150 million children from all walks of life; children who laugh and learn with Sesame's furry characters while experiencing lessons that set them up for success in school and life. It's what makes Sesame Workshop International the world's largest informal educator of young children — or, as some would say, the world's longest street.

Season 13 of *Takalani Sesame* airs weekdays at 7am on SABC1. The episodes are available in **English** on Mondays, **isiZulu** on Tuesdays, **Sesotho** on Wednesdays, **isiNdebele** on Thursdays and **Afrikaans** on Fridays.

About Takalani Sesame

Takalani Sesame is the ground-breaking South African children's programme that has educated and entertained children for more than 21 years. Recently named the Best Children's Programme at the South African Film and Television Awards (SAFTA), *Takalani Sesame* promotes early childhood education while supporting South Africa's mother-tongue based

education policy with television, radio, digital content, and community and classroom engagement

For more information, please visit <https://takalanisesame.org.za/>

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