

SESAME WORKSHOP'S 'HEALTHY HABITS FOR LIFE' INITIATIVE

Q&A with Rosemarie Truglio, Vice President, Education & Research and Susan Royer, Vice President, Education & Research Strategy

Q: Why is launching "Healthy Habits for Life" so important right now -- as opposed to a couple of years ago?

Susan Royer: When the Workshop saw data emerge [a couple of years ago out of the Centers for Disease Control], we began to really kick into gear an effort to address this issue for preschoolers. Now you are seeing the fruit of our effort.

Rosemarie Truglio: I think the timing is right because this is a current need and the public is becoming entrenched in this issue, when they may not have been two years ago. Now that parents are up to speed, looking for products and information, we are there and providing it.

Q: How long is Sesame Workshop committed to the "Healthy Habits for Life" initiative?

SR: Health has always been a part of our *Sesame Street* curriculum, therefore we will always be committed to ensuring kids are given information and messages that will help them become healthy and happy in their development. For season 36, we have turned up the dial in health, but it will always be part of our curriculum. As long as this is an important issue for children, we will address it.

RT: This is a long commitment. The first wave is hitting now with *Sesame Street's* new season, books, a home video, a new museum exhibit and it will be part of the Sesame Street Live show in the fall. I would say that components will be rolling out over the next two or three years.

Q: How closely does Education and Research work with each division?

SR: That goes back to our Sesame Workshop Model where content, research and production all work very closely together. This initiative is a real testament to our partnership.

RT: Intimately...hand-in-hand. They are not creating anything without our knowledge, our guidance and our review. We are involved in content development across all media platforms.

Q: What sort of research has been conducted by Sesame Workshop?

SR: Once we identified this was a critical need emerging for children of all ages, we invested in learning as much as we could about that issue. Our goal has been to find out exactly what the key age-appropriate messages should be for children in the preschool years. We did research with children three, four and five years of age looking at their definitions of 'health' and 'healthy food;' at how they made choices in the kind of food they liked and wanted to eat; we then investigated the power of *Sesame Street* characters and how they can help children make the right choices in healthy eating.

RT: We talk a lot about the broccoli study. When children are little they eat all kinds of foods-fruits and vegetables. But something happens in their development when all of a sudden green things become unappealing. So, we looked into whether or not a popular character, such as Elmo, would drive a child to want to eat a healthy food, such as broccoli. We have found that in fact, when you couple a not so favorite food item with a popular character, children are saying they are willing to try it! It's just the beginning steps.

Q: What are the next steps in research?

SR: The pilot studies that we conducted were on a relatively small scale. They were very helpful in developing our hypotheses. What we hope to do now is put it all together with a proposal to expand that research specifically to include a range of social, ethnic and socioeconomic sections of the population.

Q: How have each of your personal backgrounds helped in developing the “Healthy Habits” initiative?

RT: The role I serve at Sesame Workshop is to spread knowledge about how our brand can be used across all media to best influence children’s lives. Once we identify a need, such as healthier lifestyles for children, our goal is to then figure out how we develop age-appropriate content. That’s where the craft comes to play. This is especially true in the health area because this is very different than cognitive content. We know that if a child is exposed to letters and hears the name of the letter, he/she can learn without an adult intervening. But health is very different. This is an area where we know we have to get the adult on board. What we are trying to do is educate the parent/caregiver and model ways for them to address this issue with their child.

SR: That’s where the role of the Workshop comes in because we can provide concrete activities and make it accessible for all families. It’s not about joining a gym or going to classes, but it’s about putting music on at night after dinner and dancing around your house. Everyone can do that. Our goal is to keep the messages simple, concrete and accessible, in order to make a difference in children’s lives.

Q: How long before this kind of initiative can work its way into the day to day lives of parents and kids?

RT: That’s a hard question. Children, as much as parents, are instrumental in this effort. With the buckle up campaign, kids were saying, “Mommy, remember to put your seat belt on.” We are hoping with making healthy lifestyles so appealing, that the kids will show interest. I think it was, Woodie Kessel, M.D., M.P.H., Assistant Surgeon General and a member of our Healthy Habits for Life Advisory Board, who said, “Wouldn’t it be great if Elmo ate salmon?” This way, kids would come home and say, “Let’s have salmon!” That’s an example of the kids taking the initiative. This is going to be a need for a long time. We need to continue to provide exposure on *Sesame Street*, and the other divisions at Sesame Workshop should continue to devote product and information to this.

Q: What part of developing this initiative has been most satisfying to you personally?

SR: Learning about how complex and far reaching this issue is. It’s not just about what you eat and what you do. It’s about policy and community. It’s about how food is grown; how food is marketed. It’s been intellectually stimulating to try to figure it all out and satisfying to the degree in which Sesame Workshop has embraced it. Every single person here has embraced it and is working hard to figure out how to take the information and messages and embed them in their areas of work-- whether it’s books or video or licensing.

RT: For me, this is an initiative my colleagues at the Workshop really got behind because they felt like they could make a difference in the overall health of children. We often focus on cognitive issues to get them prepared for school, but if we don’t have a healthy child they’re not going to learn in school. This is really an area where we are laying the foundation for a healthy life--teaching children the importance of their bodies and how to keep them healthy. This involves what they put in their bodies; how they move their body; and keeping their body clean and getting enough rest. So this is not solely about nutrition. It’s about the overall health of children. I’m really proud that when you look at other divisions in our company, they have looked at it in a comprehensive way as well. They haven’t just narrowed it to healthy foods. I’m also really proud of the writers of *Sesame Street* for addressing this issue and the scope that they addressed it in. We just don’t have “Street Stories” addressing the issue, but they also commissioned live action films and animations. These live action films and animations will continue to air over the years. That will help with these little doses in the years ahead.

Q: As you are talking about season 36, could we talk about why this curriculum is for our preschool age children, Sesame Street’s audience? And how do the writers translate your messages into a script?

RT: The writers do it brilliantly. They do a great job. I think for the writers, it's how you communicate what the meaning is. With the guidance of our advisory board, a comprehensive group of leading experts in the area of children's health, we created the *Sesame Street* Curriculum document which guides all production. The curriculum document includes goals (i.e. messages) for the writers to address in their engaging age appropriate *Sesame Street* scripts. If there are issues with the execution of the goals, we address them with the head writers during our script review. The writers are very open to make changes, ensuring that we've got the messages right. At the end of every season, we have a deconstruction period where we actually figure out what we did; what we did well; what we didn't do so well; and what we could do differently next season.

Q: What happens if the Education & Research division feels a script doesn't achieve the curriculum?

RT: If the content is flat out wrong, the writers will change it. If it is a factual kind of thing, they will yield to us. It's the gray areas that are tricky, the things that we don't think will be comprehensible to children that they tweak a little bit. I think a good example is a story of when Baby Bear's family is in the garden. A magic wizard says, "You need to name three things about vegetables." The writers wrote: vegetables are healthy; vegetables are good for you; and the third point was they are musical. We went in and said that this didn't work as we wanted a third fact about vegetables. Now, here is where we need to come to an agreement. The writers came back and said "We gave you two facts. Now we need to make this fun. We need a punch line here. If I were to give you a third fact, what is the punch line to get them out of the garden into the next part of the story?" This is an example of healthy tension between Education and Research and *Sesame Street* Production -- there needs to be a balance between content and humor.

Q: How does a child's relationship with the Muppets support your goal in getting kids to live healthier lifestyles?

RT: It's the popularity of the Muppets. Our goal is to make these shows engaging and entertaining so they are picking up information without even realizing that they are learning through positive modeling. That's the beauty and power of *Sesame Street*, to make this a fun and engaging experience and along the way learn life issues. We have the pulse of what's going on in child development. We are fortunate that we are able to create new shows every year so that we can always address the current educational needs of children. I think the show's structured format allows us to get these messages packaged in a way that is much more comprehensible to children.