A healthy dose of Sesame for children worldwide

In the battle against serious illness—from heart disease to malaria—education is the first and most important line of defense.

And the earlier it starts, the more effective it can be. That’s why Sesame Workshop is committed to delivering high-quality health education to young children around the world, helping them grow up strong in body as well as in mind.

Through local versions of Sesame Street and special outreach programs, we’re taking on some of the world’s toughest health challenges, such as HIV/AIDS in South Africa, malaria in Tanzania, and childhood obesity in the U.S. and Latin America. As research tells us, programs like these may be just the right prescription for giving children a healthy start in life.
South Africa & Southern Africa

HIV/AIDS touches nearly every family and community in South Africa, including young children. Approximately 1 in 8 children have lost a mother, a father, or both to the disease. For children, the psychological and social consequences of the epidemic are profound. Yet a culture of silence surrounds HIV and AIDS.

In dealing with these tough circumstances, children and adults need better information and easier ways to talk about the disease. Communication is a powerful medicine against an epidemic perpetuated by silence, stigma, and fear.

That’s why we created one of the world’s first media-based HIV/AIDS curricula for children. Our efforts are fostering new openness about the disease in countries throughout Southern Africa thanks to the example of Kami, a vivacious Muppet who happens to be HIV-positive.

Opening Life-Saving Lines of Communication

In our extensive background studies in South Africa, we found that HIV/AIDS confronted parents and caregivers with a host of challenges — not only the pain of illness, death, and dying, but dealing with the stigma that surrounds the disease. What’s more, our research found children had very limited knowledge of the facts about the disease, despite its enormous impact on their lives.

Goals of our HIV/AIDS curriculum

Knowledge
1. Basic information
2. HIV and AIDS transmission
3. Standard precautions
4. HIV and AIDS symbols
5. Knowledge about death and dying
6. Body awareness

Attitudes
1. Humanization and destigmatization
2. Open discussion

Skills
1. Coping with HIV and AIDS
2. Coping with illness
3. Coping with death and dying

Working closely with specialists in HIV/AIDS education and international organizations focused on the disease, we developed a curriculum for young children that addresses HIV and AIDS education in three crucial areas: knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

The result is our Takalani Sesame TV program and outreach initiative in South Africa, Namibia, Nigeria, Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland.

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Measurable Impact

Takalani Sesame is moving the needle on HIV/AIDS awareness and attitudes, a fact demonstrated by two in-depth studies. The first study assessed changes in knowledge and behavior around HIV/AIDS among 175 children, 89 parents, and 20 preschool teachers after 10 weeks of exposure to Takalani Sesame.

The results were impressive. Children exposed to Takalani Sesame showed measurable gains in HIV/AIDS knowledge and attitudes, including basic knowledge of the disease, blood safety, destigmatization, and coping with illness. In fact, those children were four times more likely to have some knowledge of HIV/AIDS, while their attitude toward destigmatization of the disease improved fivefold compared to those who were not exposed.

The second study consisted of 349 caregivers (parents, educators, or other significant adults) of children ages 3 to 9. Caregivers in the intervention groups watched Takalani Sesame’s TV special “Talk to Me,” in which adults and children communicate about HIV and AIDS. After two weeks, researchers evaluated changes in their attitudes.

Parents and caregivers who viewed “Talk to Me,” were twice as likely to talk with their children about HIV than those who had not watched. The program’s impact goes far beyond preschoolers. That conclusion is confirmed by a national survey of HIV prevalence, incidence, behavior, and communication commissioned by The Nelson Mandela Foundation. The survey showed that “although Takalani Sesame is primarily a children’s programme, it achieves high awareness across all age groups.”

We’re seeing a similar impact in other parts of Africa as well. In Nigeria, one study showed that after exposure to Takalani Sesame content, 93 percent of children think it’s OK to play with a person who has HIV/AIDS, compared with only 38 percent before exposure.

REFERENCES

In Latin America, Plaza Sésamo reaches millions of kids at an age when they’re most receptive to healthy influences. The long-standing show and its lovable Muppets have gained enormous trust and popularity, leading to an alliance in 2006 with Dr. Valentin Fuster from the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. Dr. Fuster is the driving force behind a campaign to make heart-healthy habits part of everyday life in Colombia.

The Muppets of Plaza Sésamo give Dr. Fuster’s message lively expression, modeling positive behaviors in ways that engage children — such as a song about tasty fruits or an energizing video about fun-filled adventures. Healthy lessons such as these enliven the 50 Plaza Sésamo episodes, as well as a one-hour television special featuring the First Lady of Colombia.

To reinforce the learning in schools and community centers, our Plaza Sésamo Muppets appear in storybooks, posters, and (a favorite of teachers) a game that gets the whole class moving and kids’ hearts pumping. As key influencers in children’s education, the teachers in the program get training directly from cardiologists, pediatricians, and health educators.

United States & Latin America

The rate of childhood obesity in the United States has tripled in the past 30 years. Presently, 1 in 3 U.S. children is overweight or obese. Colombia, like many other countries, is also facing an epidemic of obesity and related illness. Cardiovascular disease claims more Colombian lives each year than do violence, hunger, and communicable diseases combined.

Sesame Street is working to reverse these trends by connecting with preschoolers when they are forming their eating, exercise, and hygiene habits. It turns out that Sesame Street’s furry friends have a remarkable ability to promote better choices.

Through Sesame Street in the U.S. and its Latin American version, Plaza Sésamo, which is seen by millions throughout Latin America, we’re instilling healthier habits early on. Fun songs and colorful characters are setting children on track for a lifetime of wellness.

Better Nutrition, Exercise, and Habits to the Rescue

Since 2004, we’ve integrated messages about healthy food choices and exercise into Sesame Street as part of our Healthy Habits for Life initiative. In one show and public-service announcement, First Lady Michelle Obama pops by to plant a vegetable garden with Elmo, explaining how foods you grow help you grow up big and strong.

We’ve also delivered a multimedia outreach program to child-care providers and at-risk families. In the program, fruits and vegetables literally talk back to their pint-size critics, advising kids to “Eat your rainbow!” and “Move your body!” To date almost six million families and child-care centers have received one of our health-focused outreach kits.

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Childhood Obesity

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Measurable Impact

In the fight against childhood obesity, Sesame Street is making a healthy difference. Research with U.S. kids shows that when a healthy food is promoted by a Sesame character, children eat 31 percent more of it than when it’s promoted by an unknown character. Another study suggests that when Elmo promotes broccoli, children’s interest in eating broccoli over chocolate increases by 127 percent.

A study in Mexico found a similar connection: Pairing healthy food with a Sesame Street character increases children’s likelihood of choosing it over unhealthy food by 10 percent.

When U.S. child-care providers used our educational outreach kits, almost all (98 percent) report children making improved food choices such as eating more fruits and vegetables. And the message hits home, too. Families report a much greater willingness to incorporate healthy foods in their diet — products such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lower-fat milk see increases as high as 18 percent.

Similar efforts are paying off in Latin America, where Colombian children saw a 15 percent improvement in knowledge, attitudes, and habits related to healthy nutrition and active lifestyle after an eight-month intervention. In Mexico, the vast majority of families (68 percent) using our Healthy Habits outreach materials report positive changes in their children’s nutrition and hygiene habits. Likewise with teachers: As many as 71 percent of teachers report that the Healthy Habits materials help their students learn healthy lessons.

Numbers such as these hold the promise of fitter, thriving families and communities for years to come. It’s amazing what a healthy dose of Sesame can do.

REFERENCES

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7. Sesame Workshop project records, 2011.
Tanzania

In a country where only 33 percent of children have access to preschool education, our Kilimani Sesame initiative in Tanzania is delivering life-saving health messages and other learning opportunities to millions of children.

This multimedia program reaches Tanzanian preschoolers through radio, television, and outreach materials. Lauded by local educators and endorsed by luminaries such as First Lady Mama Salma Kikwete, Kilimani Sesame confronts critical issues in a playful and engaging way, blending lessons on literacy and math with awareness messages about malaria and HIV/AIDS.

Through a collaboration with the nonprofit Malaria No More, Kilimani Sesame was part of a campaign to spread insecticide-treated bed nets and information to Tanzanian children and their families. The campaign included Takalani Sesame public-service announcements, storybooks, and posters with simple but critical lessons like staying inside when the sun goes down and sleeping under insecticide-treated mosquito nets. These efforts have proven to be a powerful force in the fight against the disease. After using Kilimani Sesame materials, a study showed that children know significantly more about malaria transmission and prevention.

REFERENCES

ABOUT SESAME WORKSHOP

As the creators of Sesame Street and other children’s programming, the mission of the nonprofit Sesame Workshop is focused on helping kids learn, grow, and reach their full potential. Our goal is to make learning fun at home and in the classroom by combining our lovable Muppets, sophisticated use of media, and a curriculum that addresses kids’ critical developmental needs. We work in partnership with parents, educators, and child experts to find appropriate ways to address the unique needs of today’s children, from teaching ABCs and 123s to delivering lessons about health, emotional well-being, and social tolerance around the world.

To learn more about funding opportunities, please contact Anita Stewart, Senior Vice President, Strategic Partners & Development, Sesame Workshop, at anita.stewart@sesame.org +1 212 875 6889