



Sesame Street: kids for peace (Israel, Palestinian Autonomous Region)  
Special puppets made for these special programmes

*And a young child shall  
lead them*

## *Sesame Street: Kids for Peace project*

*The Sesame Street: Kids for Peace project is a new member of the famous Sesame Street family of educational television programmes for young children. It has been developed for Palestinian children in the Palestinian Autonomous Region, and Jewish and Arabic children in Israel, to counter the messages of division and confrontation that they receive every day. The project was inspired by the 1993 handshake at the White House in Washington, USA, between the Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat and the then Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzak Rabin. It is a joint venture between the Children's Television Workshop (CTW) New York, USA, Israeli Educational Television, and the Institute of Modern Media of the Al-Quds University, Jerusalem. This article reviews the complexities involved in producing programmes for young children that can effectively promote mutual respect and understanding.*

The project's full title includes 'And a young child shall lead them' – something that catches the sense and purpose of Sesame Street (Rechov Sumsum in Hebrew, Shara'a Sumsum in Arabic).

Its objectives are:

- to teach children in a violence stricken region mutual respect and understanding, and conflict resolution and;
- to address the cognitive, affective and social needs of Israeli-Jewish, Israeli-Palestinian and Palestinian children.

The main target audiences are Israeli-Jewish, Israeli-Palestinian and Palestinian pre-school children aged three to seven and their families, in their homes and kindergartens. However, the programme makers hope to reach older children.

There are four major components in the project of which the core element is a total of 70 half hour, bilingual programmes. These have newly developed characters, puppets, street scenes, live action segments and animation to develop respect and understanding of difference. There are also specially developed books, games, and teaching materials in Arabic and Hebrew.

As well as the very obvious need to work with young children who live in such culturally divided

and violent contexts, the rationale for these programmes derives from research that shows that stereotypes of Palestinian and Israeli children are formulated at a very young age. One study reveals that by the age of six, a majority of Jewish children have a negative conceptualisation of Palestinian children. As children aged from two and a half to three and a half years old begin to use the word 'Arab' they are still neutral in their ideas about Palestinians. Soon, however information coming from their environments shapes their ideas and they develop negative views.\* A similar situation is held to be true of Palestinian children as well.

#### Culturally relevant dynamics in the preparation process

CTW was established in 1969 with the then revolutionary idea that television could be used as a tool for educating children throughout the USA. Since then, it has accumulated a



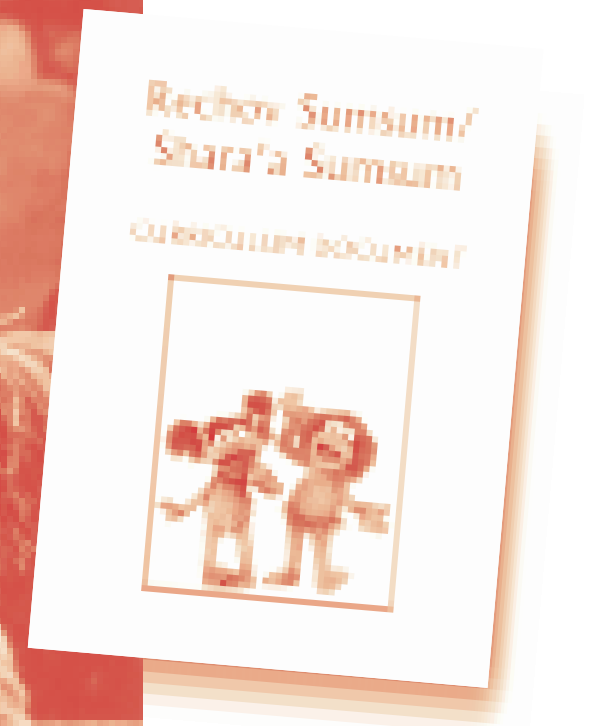
huge body of experience in making entertaining educational programmes in a wide variety of countries. Each is developed to be appropriate for the contexts that its viewers live in.

As happens in all Sesame Street productions, this project involved a strong group of local advisors and

multidisciplinary resource persons in workshops and seminars. The group included both Israelis and Palestinians: educators, writers and illustrators of children's books, musicians, animators, and specialists in pedagogy, psychology, sociology and communication. Effectively they were the voice of the child, helping the production team to

keep a child-centred focus; and they covered such curriculum issues as language, moral values, children's self image, stereotyped beliefs, and methods of bringing about change. Specific contributions related to the characteristics and needs of children in the various target groups. These included: health and nutrition;

democratic education in the family and in interpersonal relations; cognitive and social-emotional expression; conflict resolution; stereotypes and prejudice; the collective psychological barrier between Israelis and Palestinians; and trust and confidence in adults.



Mothers and children aged three to seven were consulted in group sessions about their favourite activities, about television viewing patterns and about the roles of mothers in supervising television viewing. Among many other data, this revealed that Palestinian mothers prefer television to be in Arabic rather than other languages, prefer the use of everyday, simple Arabic to classical Arabic, show high interest in segments about Israeli children; and demonstrate awareness of the programme's educational messages.

Generally, Palestinians also concluded that their children view unsuitable

television programmes, and that they must invest in educationally sound and stimulating programmes, given that television is such a major influence in children's lives.

**Building on what is shared; and understanding and respecting difference**

The initial stages of this project were tense, with a range of concerns that had to be resolved. For example, in terms of co-operation, there were questions about who would really have the decision making power, and worries about being seen as

collaborators who would be coerced into unacceptable positions. In terms of the content, some people were afraid of presenting a utopian, over-idealistic series that was not sufficiently based in reality. They questioned the themes of mutual respect and understanding when so much in the children's environments pointed to violent division and intolerance. In terms of contentiousness, there was concern about dealing with issues that raise particular intergroup tensions.

The suggested solution was to stay clear of images and material that stressed division and conflict, and to focus

instead on contexts in which Israeli Jewish and Arab, as well as Palestinian children or adults do intermingle. That includes a focus on what children share: family; emotions; games; the desire for peace; living; eating; sleeping; playing; learning and loving side by side. In practical terms, the approach was to be safe and non-political, looking through the eyes of a four year old, stressing similarities and pointing up differences so that these can be understood and respected. Children are shown the traditions, ancestors and history that they share; and their cultural and religious similarities. Differences range from foods to



holidays. Messages of understanding and respect have to be transmitted through these sorts of processes: it is only by strengthening children's national and cultural identities that they can be expected to understand and be tolerant of another culture.

However, it is also necessary to avoid generalisation. Nuances and details about people are very important and the aim is to portray the whole range of characters that exist in each community. There are differences between subgroups within each cultural group, and these include urban, rural or camp settings; socio-economic, educational and cultural levels; and language differences.

The Israelis and the Palestinians have their own street in the series: each is distinct and autonomous, and the characters come to one street or the other. There is no attempt to engineer an artificially mixed context. This device also avoids the problems of devising a third setting in which the two sides could meet freely; or of having a token or stereotypical presence by one side or the other.

#### Language issues

Each Sesame Street: Kids For Peace programme is bilingual, being comprised of segments in both Arabic and Hebrew. Naturally the Hebrew programmes contain more Hebrew than Arabic and vice versa; while each also contains 'cross-over segments' – parts in which characters who live in one of the streets visit their friends in the other.

Language is the best door into any culture – it can almost guarantee a great deal of understanding. But many other issues also arose. For example, it was felt that Palestinians were losing their capacity to express themselves adequately and fluently in Arabic – especially the Israeli Arabs, for whom Hebrew was becoming the dominant language, something that might undermine their cultural heritage. The importance of Arabic to Palestinians therefore had to be asserted.

Making a bilingual programme for three to seven year olds presented problems. For example, subtitles were useless: young children cannot read

them. However, researchers identified some 3,000 elements that the two languages share. These include sounds, phrases and greetings, and words for numbers, body parts and some household items. By accentuating some of these, it was felt that the series could do a great deal to



introduce children to simple elements of each other's language and to help mutual respect and understanding.

#### The programmes ... and reactions to them

The first programme was broadcast on 1 April 1998 on Israel Educational Television's (IETV) Second Channel. It was broadcast throughout Israel and parts of the Palestinian Autonomous Region. It was 30 minutes long and consisted of segments produced by IETV, Al-Quds University's Institute of Modern Media, and some CTW segments that had been dubbed into

Hebrew and Arabic. On the same day, the first edition of a Palestinian version of the programme was premiered on Al-Quds Educational Television. This was 15 minutes long, and included segments produced by all three participating organisations. Each of the remaining programmes in this series – 20 in all – were broadcast three times a week to six major Palestinian cities.

Meanwhile, IETV went on to broadcast 15 programmes in a two-week period following the 1 April premiere and, following the summer break, broadcast the remaining programmes at the rate of one per day. Further broadcasting schedules include timings that suit targeted audiences such as kindergarten teachers as they work with young children.

A summative evaluation of the entire project has started and will continue through 22 weeks. Among other goals, it will determine the programme's effectiveness in teaching the original educational goals; and examine children's exposure to the programmes.

Anecdotal responses to the programmes have been very positive: children are watching them, enjoying them and learning from them. ○

\* Lazar M and Spyer A (1995) *A summary of selected research and programmes: dealing with stereotypes and specifically stereotypes of Arab and Israeli Jewish pre-school children in Israel.*

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