

Norbert Neuss/Ira Neukirchen

# Samson is frightened

**In Germany *Sesame Street* spots help children and parents to deal with fear induced by television images**

**One possibility of co-operation with producers and researchers is media-educational counselling, such as in the case of the spots featuring the *Sesame Street* Muppets for support in crisis situations.**

By now almost every child is familiar with images of war and catastrophes from television. The terrible television images and news are often not only incomprehensible for children but can induce fears. Parents, too, are made uncertain of how their children can best cope with these television images.

*Sesame Street* continues to regard itself as a champion of young children and is therefore developing spots to help children and parents managing their fear.

The popular Muppets make serious subjects accessible to families with the typical *Sesame Street* wink. The German production team sought the advice of Norbert Neuss from the standpoint of media education to provide it with sound, constructive suggestions, especially in the choice of subjects and coping strategies.

## **Which target group is aimed at and which identification figures play a part?**

The spots have been developed bearing both parents and children in mind. The German actress and comedian Anke Engelke, as a new *Sesame Street* resident, takes on the role of

the parents. She is as familiar to the adults as the Muppets are to the children. With their different characters, Samson and Finchen represent the children's individual reactions. For the children the Muppets are well-known and popular identification figures and make the children's perspective clear to the adult viewers. Sometimes the Muppets find the coping strategies themselves and are then supported with empathy by Anke Engelke. Anke, however, suggests possible solutions herself and helps the Muppets to deal with their state of fright.

## **Which subjects are taken up in the spots?**

As far as contents are concerned, various crisis situations are taken up, such as bomb attacks, floods, fires, war or destruction of the environment. When children react with fear to television images experts recommend that the children should be taken seriously and that the parents should be there when they need them. Children should not be left alone with disconcerting images and information; instead it is important to talk to them about these issues. In one spot



Samson from *Sesame Street*

Finchen complains to Anke that no one explains to her the terrible television images. Anke reassures Finchen and gladly answers all her questions. In another spot Samson fantasises himself into the role of a heroic fireman and through play copes with the images that induce fear. At the same time Anke gives him support as a female fire fighter.

After children have seen disturbing television images, experts advise that they should be given a feeling of security, especially before going to sleep. In one spot Finchen is reminded of images of an earthquake by a bedtime story. Anke tries to calm her

down and create a feeling of security by means of the familiar ritual of going to sleep.

In this spot coping strategies are presented: creative acting out (painting, playing music and modelling); fantasising (putting the world straight for themselves in a positive way); role play (coping by play); talking (including talking to themselves); providing security (keeping to rituals); becoming active themselves; acting out physically (doing sport).

Besides these strategies of anxiety management, distraction can also offer a possible way of coping with the strain of impressions and feelings. Distraction from fear, however, should, if possible, be a conscious reaction and not mere repression. When Samson is frightened by a flood he hears about on the radio, then Anke explains the news in greater detail and finally involves Samson in a game of football. (Motto: "Come on, now let's do something nice to recover from the shock.")

### How are the Muppets in the spots confronted with the images and news that induce fear?

For preschool children it is television and radio from which they primarily experience news that induce fear. As preschool children live very intensely in the "here and now" it is important for the connection between the reception situation and the child's reaction to be depicted clearly and without delay. The spots are composed accordingly: the image inducing the fear is directly followed by the emotional reaction, the coping strategy is directly added. Finchen has seen an oil tanker disaster on television. Immediately after this she tries to clear up the destruction of the environment in a picture she paints. The focus is on Finchen's reaction and not on the news inducing the fear.

### Which crises are addressed in what form?

In selecting the contents of the subjects for the spots, media-educational knowledge from qualitative reception research is taken into account (cf. Neuss, 1999; Götz, 2002): In the children's perception it is not only wars that are a disquieting subject, but also those conflicts and crises which are closer to the children's everyday life-world. These include floods, environmental disasters (animals are exposed to dangers), fires, bomb attacks and earthquakes. Children can relate to many of these subjects. Thus they ask themselves: What will happen if my parents are killed in a car accident? Will the fish now die in the river close to our home?

### What is intended by the spots?

In the spots an attempt is consciously made not to explain to children the causes of wars and the like. Instead they concentrate on handling frightening or disquieting images. Children and parents should be encouraged to actively cope with unavoidable television images. The motto of the spots is therefore: "I make my world the way I can put up with it."

Studio Hamburg has been commissioned by NDR Television (Norddeutscher Rundfunk) to produce 8 spots – each no longer than 1 minute – at the beginning of 2004. The spots are expected to be broadcast in the *ARD Morning Magazine*, where they will reach their intended target group. For both young and old understand when Finchen insists that Anke should give her an explanation of the incomprehensible television images, thus remaining true to the well-known *Sesame Street* motto: "If you don't ask questions you'll always be stupid." ■

Translated by Geoffrey P. Burwell



Finchen from *Sesame Street*

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