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Modelling life skills on *Sesame Street*

Social learning is the main concern of *Sesame Street*. As a consequence of September 11th, Sesame Workshop produced episodes on integration, coping with loss and bullying, and tested whether children really learned the intended strategies.

From its inception, *Sesame Street* has taught children important lessons that extend beyond letters and numbers. The producers, writers, and educators who work on *Sesame Street* have consistently integrated cognitive, social, and emotional content into all of its stories and segments. Throughout the years *Sesame Street* has focussed on a variety of social and societal issues such as love, marriage, pregnancy, death, race relations, and natural disasters. At the time of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, 46 of the 50 episodes of the season were written. In response to the events of September 11th, *Sesame Street* produced the final four shows of the season to help preschoolers cope with emotional issues and ultimately, teach them strategies to help them become more resilient. Because *Sesame Street* has a history of addressing sensitive topics, it was not unusual for us to respond to this tragic event. However, the magnitude and meaning of the event brought new challenges regarding ways to address the well-being and safety of young children. The socio-emotional ramifications of that day varied depending on the degree

to which children were exposed to the events. Some children lost loved ones in the attack; others feared for their own safety; and yet others may have faced exclusion based on their ethnicity or religious beliefs. The four programmes that were created focussed on:

1. cultural diversity and inclusion,
2. coping with loss,
3. dealing with a bully,
4. appreciation of firefighters.

The present study analysed children's comprehension of and learning from three of the four episodes. We did not study children's response to the firefighter episode. In the firefighter episode, a grease fire broke out while Elmo was dining in Hooper's Store. Elmo was very frightened. To help Elmo overcome his fear, a firefighter invited him to the firehouse where Elmo learned all about firefighters and the work that they do. While the episode did focus on a strategy for coping with an emotionally disturbing event, the strategy was employed by an adult (the firefighter) who provided Elmo with information. For the present study, we were interested in focussing on whether children could be taught strategies that they themselves would be able to utilise given a particularly stressful and emotional situation. Therefore, we sought to examine how children might integrate such strategies into their own schemata given related circumstances.

Participants were 107 children from a mixed-income preschool in a suburban area of New Jersey. The group

was 63 % White, 15 % Latino, 12 % African-American, and 10 % other. Children were randomly assigned to view one of three episodes (Inclusion, Loss, Bullying). Children were interviewed in three phases. First, there was a pretest to assess children's baseline knowledge of ways to handle conflict or stressful situations similar to those presented in the *Sesame Street* stories (Pretest/Baseline). Second, immediately after viewing, children were asked questions about their comprehension of the stories, as well as questions about the application of particular strategies given a conflict or stressful situation (Post-viewing). Finally, one week after viewing, children were asked the same comprehension and application questions that they were asked immediately after viewing to assess whether there were long-lasting effects of viewing (One week post-viewing). There were 90 children who participated in all three phases (16 % attrition). The 17 children who did not participate in all three waves were not included in the analyses.

Procedure

Because comprehension is a necessary pre-requisite for understanding application, for each of the three scenarios (inclusion, coping with loss, and dealing with a bully) children were first asked questions that assessed what they understood about the problem, strategy, and solution demonstrated in the episodes. We

then assessed children's ability to apply the strategies learned by asking them to provide verbal and behavioural strategies that they would use themselves and advise to others if confronted with similar situations. There were four questions asked to illicit such responses:

- 1) What would you say?
- 2) What would you do?
- 3) What would you tell a friend to say?
- 4) What would you tell a friend to do given the three scenarios?

Responses to each question were coded as

- a) positive (prosocial techniques modelled in the episode),
- b) negative (antisocial techniques), and
- c) neutral (generally prosocial but not modelled on *Sesame Street* as effective solutions).

Children's responses within each question by each type of response were then summed across the four questions, and standardised within type across time, to yield comparable scores across the different types of responses. Scores were standardised across time to allow for an analysis of change across time.

Inclusion/cultural awareness

Comprehension

In the inclusion/cultural awareness episode, Big Bird's pen pal, Gulliver, visits *Sesame Street*. Big Bird is looking forward to introducing Gulliver to Snuffy. Big Bird is dismayed to discover that Gulliver refuses to play with anyone who is not a bird. The conflict ends with Big Bird telling Gulliver "If you don't want to play with my friend, then I don't want to play with you!" Gulliver realises the error of his ways, and finally they all sing and play together. Gulliver then comes to terms with the fact that differences can be wonderful. Comprehension was strong; almost all of

the kids knew the problem was that Gulliver did not want to play with Big Bird's other friends (Post-viewing: 87 %, One week post-viewing: 72 %). About one half knew that Gulliver only wanted to play with birds (Post-viewing: 46 %, One week post-viewing: 53 %). Many also reported the resolution that they all played and/or sang together (Post-viewing: 56 %, One week post-viewing: 55 %). About a quarter of the children recalled Big Bird saying "If you don't want to play with my friend, then I don't want to play with you!" (Post-viewing: 28 %, One week post-viewing: 29 %).

Application

In order to assess change over time in use of strategies, children were asked:

- 1) If someone says they won't play with your friend, what would you do?
- 2) What would you say to the kid who won't play with your friend?

In order to find out whether the children were able to apply the information they had learned from *Sesame Street* we asked them to think of hypothetical situations with fictitious children – here John and Philip.

- 3) What are some things John can do to play with his friend with Philip too?

- 4) What are some things John can say so they can all play together? (see graph 1).

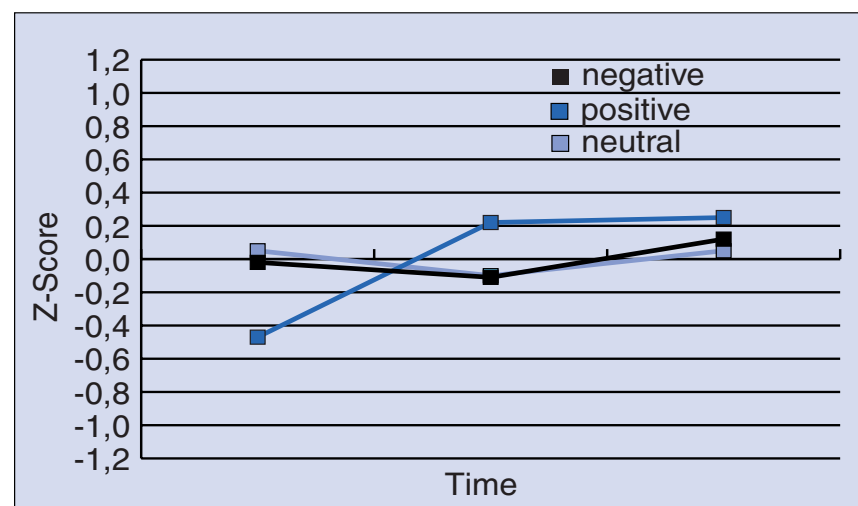
Children's responses to the questions were coded as:

Negative (-1): any negative behaviour, including hitting, walking/running away, getting away from them, do something else such as play with a different friend or play with a toy;
Neutral (0): any verbal comment such as I'll work on it, think about it; get an adult; tell on them, put on a black shirt so we can all play, say please, that's not nice/not fair, be nice/good, say no, I don't like you;

Positive (1): ask if they can all play together; we can all play/get along/be friends, you can play with us, it doesn't matter what you wear, ask if we can all play together, if you don't want to play with him/her, I don't want to play with you, don't play with me.

Sesame Street clearly provided children with strategies that they did not know to use before viewing. Positive strategies were significantly lower at baseline than neutral or negative strategies. However, there was a significant increase in positive strategies from baseline to post-viewing that maintained through the one week post-viewing. Neutral and negative strategy types were not significantly

Graph 1: Strategies for inclusion





Gina and Big Bird

different from one another at baseline and there were no changes over time in such strategies over time.

Coping with loss

Comprehension

In another episode Big Bird copes with the loss of his “pet” turtle, Seymour, when it wanders back to its natural environment. Big Bird is sad, but, by talking with friends, realises that the turtle is a wild animal and has probably returned to his real home. Gina is particularly kind and helpful and models prosocial coping skills by giving Big Bird a hug, asking him to tell a story about the pet, and by validating his feelings and using comforting words (e. g. “I know you loved your pet”). Comprehension was very strong. All of the children (100 %) reported that this was a story where Big Bird lost his turtle both immediately after viewing and one week later. Most children reported things that Big Bird liked about Seymour (e. g., got food for him, took care of him, counted his spots, etc) (Post-viewing: 82 %, One week post-viewing: 71 %). Most were able to identify the way that Big Bird felt when he lost his turtle was “sad.”

(Post-viewing: 94 %, One week post-viewing: 80 %). The majority of children also reported something that Gina did to make Big Bird feel better such as gave him a hug, told a story, explained that he’s a wild animal (Post-viewing:

85 %, One week post-viewing: 96 %). The increase from post-viewing to One week post-viewing is largely explained by the increase in the number of children who cited “hug” as a strategy. It is likely that giving someone a hug when someone is sad is a strategy children already knew.

Application

In order to assess their understanding of the use of strategies, children were asked:

- 1) If your friend lost something and can’t get it back, what would you do to help?;

- 2) What would you say to make him/her feel better?
- 3) Anthony’s friend Tom came over to make Anthony feel better when Anthony lost something. What can Tom do to make Anthony feel better?
- 4) What can Tom say to make Anthony feel better? (see graph 2)

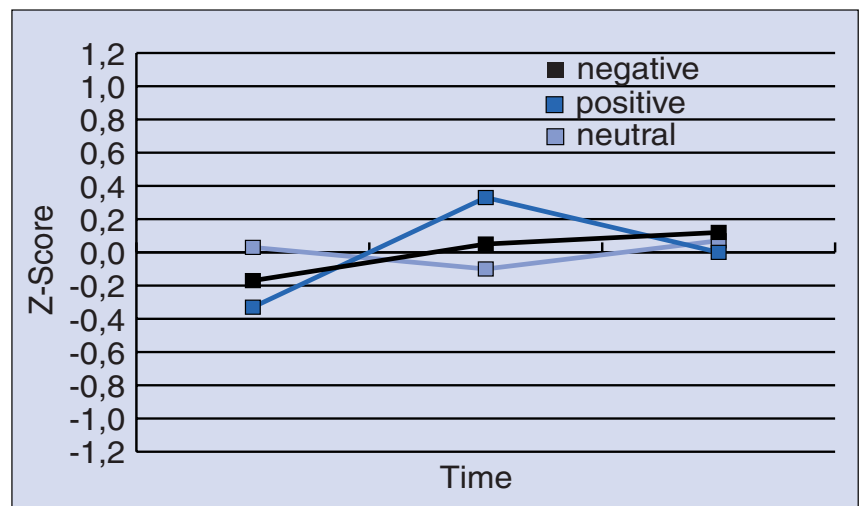
Children’s responses to the four questions were coded as:

Negative (-1): leave them alone, you can get a new/another cat, find something else to play with, you can play with my cat, imagine you have a cat; *Neutral* (0): I’ll find it, I’ll help find it, get adult, buy a new cat, share my cat, give them a present or a card, I’ll play with them, sing songs, share my toys, come out to dinner with me, they’ll come to my house, say it’s okay, don’t worry, it’ll be alright, don’t be sad, don’t cry, feel better, I love you;

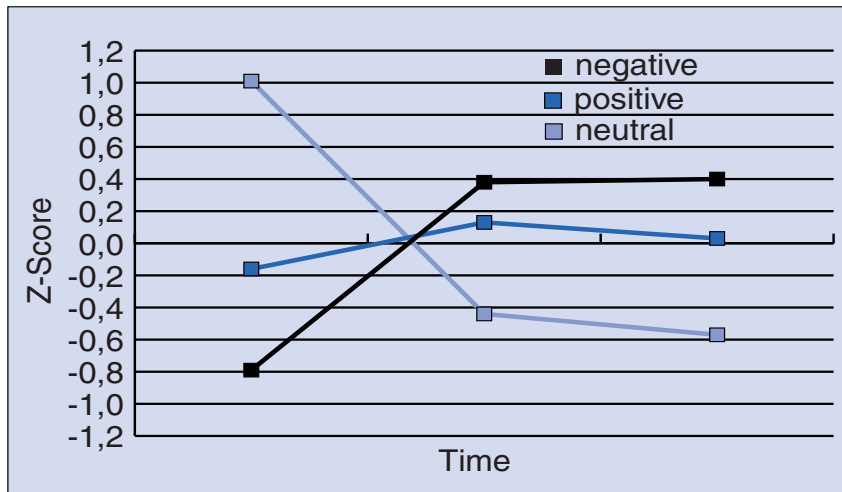
Positive (1): I’ll give them a hug, hug them, give them a kiss, stay with them, comforting friend by hugging or talking about loss, say sorry, what’s wrong, tell me about your cat, talk to them about it, talk to them, tell them a story about the cat, say “I know you loved your cat.”

There was an increase in positive coping strategies from baseline to

Graph 2: Coping with loss



Graph 3: Strategies for dealing with a bully



post-viewing. At the one week follow-up, however, the level of positive responses was similar to what it was at pretest. In other words, children learned strategies in the short-term but forgot them a week later. It is likely that children's strategies returned to baseline because there was likely no opportunity to practice the strategies learned during the week in between Post-viewing and One week post-viewing. There were no changes over time for any of the other strategy types. There were also no differences within time across strategies types.

Bullying

Comprehension

In the episode that focussed on bullying, Telly is excited when his cousin Izzy comes to visit. But Izzy is a bully and takes Telly's triangle collection and refuses to share. Telly becomes frustrated and upset. Telly then talks to Gordon who helps Izzy understand Telly's point of view. The strategies modelled were asking an adult for help, using the language: that's my toy, give it back to me now, and having the adult ask the bully how he would feel if someone took something of his. Comprehension scores indicated that almost all of the kids knew that the problem was that Izzy

didn't want to share the triangles. (Post-viewing: 97 %, One week post-viewing: 75 %). Many children were also able to name strategies that Telly used to get his triangles back. (Post-viewing: 91 %, One week post-viewing: 73 %). When asked specifically what Gordon said Telly should do, more than half reported that he should ask for it back. Post-viewing: 75 %, One week post-viewing: 59 %). Most kids reported that Gordon took Izzy's hat as a way of helping Telly get his triangles back. (Post-viewing: 72 %, One week post-viewing: 41 %). Some could also report what Gordon said to Izzy (i. e., how would you feel if someone took your hat and wouldn't give it back? (Post-viewing: 38 %, One week post-viewing: 31 %).



Telly

Application

To assess whether children could transfer the strategies learned in the bully episode to a novel situation. Children were asked:

- 1) What would you do? and
- 2) What would you say if someone took your own toy away and wouldn't give it back?

They were then told a story about how a boy named "Jim" takes "Sam's" car away. The children were then asked:

- 3) What can Sam do to get his car back?
- 4) What can Sam say to Jim to get his car back?

(see graph 3)

Children's responses to the questions were coded as:

Negative (-1): any negative behaviour, including hit them, grab, take something of theirs, negative verbal response;

Neutral (0): share, play with a different toy, positive verbal response such as that's not nice, that's not fair, no, please, thank you (but not able to say please give my toy back,) ask for it back (doesn't include specific words);

Positive (1): get an adult, I'll tell, or actual words that ask for it back such as that's my toy, give it back now.

Results suggest that at pretest children reported more neutral strategies, followed by positive strategies, and finally negative strategies. We assume that because the children were in a structured daycare setting they had frequent encounters with other children who wanted their things. We also assume that the children are taught socially appropriate ways of handling such conflict because they are in such a setting, which could explain the higher neutral and positive strategies at baseline. There were no changes in positive strategies offered across time, nor were there any significant changes from Post-viewing to One week post-viewing for any of the strategy types. There was, however, a significant increase for negative

strategies from Pretest to Post-viewing, and a significant decrease for neutral strategies from Pretest to Post-viewing. This last finding suggests that the episode encouraged children to use negative strategies in dealing with a bully.

Conclusion and discussion

Each of the three episodes tried to teach children how to cope with emotional situations. The findings across all three programmes suggest that children understood the difficult problems and the emotions involved in those situations. A major focus of *Sesame Street's* core mission from its inception has been to deliver messages about inclusion and cultural appreciation. We have taught children to embrace differences, as well as to understand the similarities that connect all of us despite those differences. The inclusion episode clearly taught children new and positive strategies in dealing with those who want to exclude others. As preschool children are learning to categorise and classify, in-group/out-group types of conflicts and decisions become more frequent. We were encouraged by the finding that it seems children learned from this episode in the short-term and long-term.

Similarly, children learned new and positive strategies about dealing with loss from the episode about Big Bird's turtle, but they did not retain these new strategies learned over time. The loss episode, though clearly understood, focussed on a hopefully infrequent occurrence in children's lives. Though children learned new strategies right after viewing, it is likely that there were no opportunities for them to practice their newly learned strategy during the week.

The results of the bully episode were not as positive. While it did teach children new strategies, it had an opposite effect to what was intended. In fact, we wound up inadvertently

validating hitting. In trying to understand why this had occurred, we re-examined the episode. The episode showed Telly trying different techniques to get the triangles back from Izzy to no avail. Telly becomes so frustrated that he says that he feels like hitting Izzy. Gordon tells Telly to think about what would happen if he were to hit Izzy. Telly then imagines that he would hit Izzy, Izzy would hit Telly back, and they would both be hurt and end up in the hospital. Even while both of them are lying in the hospital beds, Izzy still has the triangles. Clearly, Telly realises, hitting would not be a useful strategy.

While it may have been clear to Telly that hitting would not be appropriate, there was likely something very entertaining and memorable about this thought sequence. There was suspenseful music in the background and Telly (consistent with his personality) acted in an over-the-top anxious and dramatic way about the dilemma. Given Telly's performance, children may have perceived these scenes as humorous, thus counteracting the message we intended to portray. The intent of the show, however, was to model forethought and show the negative consequences of violence or anti-social behaviour, but perhaps the highly visual and interesting footage of Telly's thought process interfered with children's understanding of the main message, which was, that violence is NOT a solution.

As a result of these research findings, the producers of *Sesame Street* decided to no longer air this episode. The decision to shelve the bullying episode was not a drastic measure or a diversion from tradition. At *Sesame Street*, each episode serves as an experiment and through research with children we assess whether programmes are teaching the lessons we sought to teach. For example, in 1992 we created a story to help children cope with the rising rates of divorce. The episode was designed to convey

the information that parents love their children even when the parents get divorced. The research on that programme indicated that, in fact, children were more confused by the message than comforted by it. Therefore, the episode was never aired.

In conclusion, the findings across all three episodes suggest that children understand conflicts, solutions and emotions involved in the scenarios that were created in response to living in a post 9-11 world. Indeed, children can learn important prosocial strategies from television and use these modeled strategies in their own lives if faced with a similar situation. Moreover, if they have opportunities to practice, they will retain such strategies over time.

Since its inception, *Sesame Street* has remained committed to children. We rise to the challenges of today's world and develop innovative ways to help children learn and grow. Within a community of fun, loveable and curious Muppets and nurturing racially diverse human characters, *Sesame Street* will continue to address socially important and relevant issues that help contribute to the well-being of all children. ■

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