

Cairo Arafat

Shara'a Simsim-Palestine

A safe, fun and educational street for Palestinian children

The Palestinian *Sesame Street* has been on air for 8 years now. In addition to the characteristic preschool curriculum, the series helps children deal with their difficult everyday life with pro-social messages.

Kareem picks up his broken airplane. Haneen touches her swing that is now hanging on only one hinge. Both of them are saddened by the devastation and destruction that has occurred around them. How could this happen? Why did it happen? What are they to do now? Then their friend, Handyman Saleem, comes outside. He explains to them that the storm last night was responsible for the damage around them. He acknowledges the feelings of sadness and fear that Haneen and Kareem have regarding the storm and its power to destroy. But he then asks them, "What can we do to make things better again?" Haneen and Kareem look up at him surprised and confused. Fix things, make things better – aren't they too young? What can they do?

The Palestinian Muppets

This is one of the story lines used in the newest season of *Shara'a Simsim-Palestine*. Haneen and Kareem are two puppets specifically developed to represent Palestinian children. Haneen is a 4-year-old pink and orange "puppet monster" full of energy, curiosity and spontaneity. Kareem is a slightly older, but more knowledge-

able "rooster puppet" who likes to read, thinks before he acts and wants to become a pilot. Saleem is a young male handyman new to this series. He likes to fix things that are broken. He has a gentle nature, is always there to help Haneen and Kareem, and takes the time to help them understand what is happening around them. He shows the children/puppets respect. He listens to their ideas, feelings, and plans. But more than that, he encourages them to do things: they have the power to take action. He knows that although Haneen and Kareem are young, they are still able to act positively. He assists them in finding ways to help make their own lives better and also that of others around them.

These puppets have been talking to Palestinian children for over 8 years now. They convey messages of empowerment. Children have feelings. They can and should express them. These feelings can be pleasant ones like happiness, excitement, satisfaction, joy, closeness, and empathy. But they can also have feelings of sadness, fear, of being overwhelmed and angry, as well. There is nothing wrong with our feelings. We should all be able to talk about our feelings with others. But we should also learn how to control our feelings, deal with them and not hurt ourselves or others. But these puppets are smart and savvy. They do not lecture or preach to children. No, Haneen and Kareem simply live their lives. They go to school, visit neighbours, visit with children who have special needs and

do all the things that most children would do. Through their daily escapades, children see them trying to solve problems, how to care for their environment, find out what kinds of foods are good for us and what things are not good for us. They see the puppets being active members of their community helping to keep it clean, caring for animals with kindness, respecting the property of others, and simply having fun being curious and playful, which is what we all wish for children.

The story

Sesame Workshop, New York, has worked closely with Al-Quds University's Institute of Modern Media in making *Shara'a Simsim-Palestine* a grounded reality. Through the leadership of Sesame Workshop and the director of the Al Quds University Institute of Modern Media, Da'oud Kuttab, the programme has now completed its 3rd season.

The 1st season was produced in 1997/98 in co-operation with the Israeli *Sesame Street* team. During this first production, the Palestinian side focussed on building up local capacity on production of children's TV shows. These were still the early years of the Oslo peace accords, and it was the first time that Palestinians within the Occupied Palestinian Territory had their own television stations. Hence, there was limited national capacity on developing an educational/recreational curriculum, writing sto-

ries and songs for children that could be adapted for TV. Filming, developing animation, working the puppets, and all the other activities needed to produce a children's show, were skills that had to be developed. Hence, in this 1st season, the focus was on building up local expertise in production of children's programmes that would demonstrate to Palestinian children that they were part of a larger world. There are countries and people outside of Palestine who speak different languages, eat different food, live in different kinds of environments and homes. But these people are a lot like

us, too. They have feelings, they like to play, they want to be loved and give love, they like to learn, and they go to school. We should be respected and we should respect others, that was the core message. In addition, this 1st series – like all the following seasons – focussed on building up national and personal pride and confidence.

A 2nd series was soon started up, and it coincided with the start of the second intifada with devastation and violence surrounding children on all sides. The show did not directly address the conflict in children's lives, but tried to offer them a gateway to a more sane and safe zone. This 2nd series continued to focus on learning and the importance of reading. This was a way to encourage children and their families to read. To use books and stories as a way to go beyond the chaos and despair that was surrounding all of them. Imaginative stories were gathered from local and global sources that focussed on the importance of conflict resolution, of co-operation, of helping others, exploring and protecting one's environment and making it better. The show emphasised the importance of accepting oneself and others for who we are.

Here, children saw Gazan children out in the sea playing and fishing, in the green fields of Deir Balah riding horses, atop a castle in a local village, shaping clay, and listening to blind children making joyful music.

From an academic point of view, this second series also supported children learning their numbers, their alphabet, spatial relations, and developing pre-reading and social skills. This was given more priority because many young children were not allowed to go to school on a regular basis. Due to random and frequent bomb-

ings, many children and preschool children could not reach their school. Therefore, the episodes try to emphasise many of the concepts and knowledge that they should and would be learning at school if the situation improved. Because children's reality was so harsh, the series used scripts and formats that were more surreal for children (animations for instance) and allowed children to temporarily move into happier and more expansive domains. Interestingly, parents who watched *Shara'a Simsim-Palestine* with their children also enjoyed these shows that represent fun, new worlds and new beginnings. In most of the outreach materials produced to support the shows, the importance of parents and siblings watching alongside the child were emphasised and encouraged.

The newest pro-social curriculum

The newest series that is now currently being aired is a continuation on the aforementioned goals, but adds on the importance of the broader community in the lives of children (the neigh-

bourhood, schools, community centres, etc.) and the importance of social values like volunteer work, group participation, co-operation, and shared responsibilities. The core message is "I can do ...". The importance of empowering children to deal with the hardships in their lives and helping to make things better is a key message. Books thrown out by others are collected by Haneen and Kareem. They give these books to the local municipality so they can set up a children's library. A person needs some help, so they put together a concert to collect assistance. A young bird falls out of the tree – kindness and care is needed. Children play games that are fun, but require team work and co-operation. In each of the shows, children are children, they are caring, kind, warm and sensitive, but they are also forgetful, fearful, and confused sometimes. So are the adults. The issue is that all of us must work together to make our society and the world a better place. Bad things can and do happen, but we must all work together to change things for the better.

This is what children have taught me. *Sesame Street* has learned most from children. They are the best critics of the show and along the way they continue to inform us on what is good and what is right. They also remind us that learning is fun and that as we learn, we should use this knowledge to make the world a better place for everyone. ■

THE AUTHOR

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