

Andrea Holler

# “SpongeBob makes himself and the children laugh”

## Why *SpongeBob SquarePants* is appealing for kindergarteners

Although it was not produced for this target group, 3- to 6-year-olds already love the series *SpongeBob SquarePants* because of its character construction and the perspectives and experiences that are so typical for children.

The yellow, square sponge is firmly established in the German children's television landscape since its first appearance in August 2002. At first (adult) glance, the programme is whimsical. In an underwater world, SpongeBob works as a burger flipper in a fast-food restaurant. During his free time he tries in vain to get a boat driver's licence, goes jellyfish-hunting, makes soap bubbles and takes care of his meowing pet snail Gary. With his best friend Patrick, a pink starfish, and the female squirrel Sandy, who can only live underwater in a diving suit, he is always up to mischief and gets on the nerves of his neighbour, Squidward Tentacles, an ever grumpy octopus. The idea for the series came from marine biologist and animations specialist Stephen Hillenburg – and became an unparalleled success story: aside from almost 80 episodes on DVD, a movie, audio book series and an own magazine, there are products from over 50 German license takers. Not only on store shelves is the sponge all-pervading, since on NICK and Super RTL, daily between 6 and 9 episodes of the series are shown. On prime-time at 7:45 p. m. on Super

RTL the series reaches a market share of 23.5 % among the 3- to 13-year-olds.<sup>1</sup>

The target group of the successful programme are elementary-age children and older, but already in kindergartens the sponge is well-known and popular (cf. table 1). Asked for their favourite programme, 160 children between 3 and 6 years responded rather univocally with 41 mentions:<sup>2</sup> “*SpongeBob SquarePants*”. Among the boys, the series is somewhat more popular than among the girls and is watched mostly by the older kindergarten children (Holler, 2005). In the qualitative part of this study 20 5- to 6-year-olds painted and narrated what they like about their favourite programme *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

### Characters

An important part of the success of *SpongeBob* is due to the characters. It is them who play a central role in

the descriptions and statements of the kindergarten children.

### *SpongeBob: humorous, extraordinary and competent*

The kindergarten children especially enjoy the main character of the series. Above all, they describe him as funny: “he is funny” and “he makes himself and the children laugh”. Children also think it's great that he does extraordinary things. SpongeBob not only lives in a pineapple, he also goes jellyfish-hunting and keeps a snail as a pet.

A third aspect of *SpongeBob* the children highlight can be described as a kind of ‘competence’. He not only goes to school and “applies for his driver's license”, but he goes to work: “He kinda makes prawn burgers.” In a way, *SpongeBob* crosses age groups: he is toddler, pupil and adult all in one.

Several children note one extraordinary skill of *SpongeBob* that they particularly like: “He makes his face long or pulls the whole face into the Sponge.” As a sponge, *SpongeBob*

	Favourite programme	Mentions (160 total)	Boys (79)	Girls (81)
1 <sup>st</sup> place	<i>SpongeBob SquarePants</i>	41	24	17
2 <sup>nd</sup> place	<i>Disney's Adventures of the Gummi Bears</i>	10	3	7
3 <sup>rd</sup> place	<i>Letters from Felix</i>	9	5	4
4 <sup>th</sup> place	<i>Bob the Builder</i>	7	5	2
	<i>Power Rangers</i>	7	7	0
5 <sup>th</sup> place	<i>Teletubbies</i>	6	3	3
	<i>Heidi</i>	6	1	5

Table 1: The favourite programmes of 3- to 6-year-olds (Holler, 2005)



“This is Squidward, SpongeBob and Patrick” (Matthias, 6-year-old boy)

can take on all kinds of forms and shapes; he can split himself in half or soak in water to change his size.

#### *Patrick, the funny and inferior sidekick*

Aside from the main character SpongeBob, his friend Patrick is important to the children. Especially the boys like his particular features, i. e. his body shape or his home underneath a rock. Most frequently Patrick is mentioned as funny. However, he is characterised by this kind of funniness that results from clumsiness and naiveté: “He kids around, too, but he doesn’t play tricks” or “he’s funny because he does stupid things”. In contrast to SpongeBob, Patrick is the little dummy, who is incapable of doing things. Patrick’s lack of skills is expressed by the children as follows: “He always forgets things” or “he does not go to school, only sometimes”. Also, unlike SpongeBob, he does not wear pants, shirt, socks, tie and shoes but is “the one who doesn’t have anything to wear, only pants”. In spite of his apparent imperfection, many of the interviewed children find the character fabulous. One boy even would like to be Patrick because he is so amusing and does funny things. Patrick is a character that children can feel superior to. Due to his lack of skills he brings out SpongeBob’s abilities. In spite of, or especially because of his weaknesses, Patrick is SpongeBob’s best friend and is perceived by

the children as very amusing. His clear and positive friendship with the protagonist is central to the children and is accordingly referred to often.

#### *Sandy, the strong girl*

Sandy Cheeks, the squirrel, is another important character that is liked by boys and girls. She is a strong, bold and assertive figure and is good friends with SpongeBob. Especially her athleticism takes centre stage for the children: “I also like her because she can do karate already” and “she stands on her hands” and “she kinda skis with a shell”. Sandy is the favourite character of 6-year-old Lena who lives with her older sister and single mom in a small town. The kindergarten teachers describe her as a very quiet child. Lena describes herself as less adept. Riding the scooter, for example, she stumbles and hurts herself. Watching television, however, she does karate together with Sandy and is fascinated by the assertive character that never fails. The shy girl who experiences herself as weak and vulnerable in her everyday life is able to excel and feel strong through her heroine. This also comes up during the interview: At first Lena is very reserved, speaks in a low voice and appears to be shy. This all changes as soon as she talks about Sandy. Now Lena becomes very lively, gets up unasked and shows how she does karate.

#### *Squidward, the boring adult*

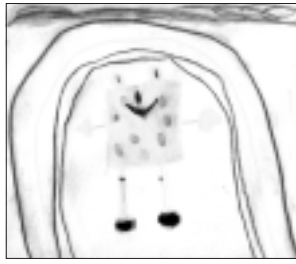
Squidward is quite the opposite of the other protagonists. He is “grown-up”, grumpy and irritated by SpongeBob and Patrick. The interviewed children agree: “He only works and learns to play the flute and such things, but he always stays at home” and “when SpongeBob and Patrick have fun, then he always yells”. Nevertheless, this rather boring character is still part of the show for the children.

Squidward is a symbol of the adult’s world for the children and in his relationship with SpongeBob and Patrick they see their own experiences represented. For example, 5-year-old Jakob who has to deal with the rules his parents set up. He says that he, just like the characters on television, likes to fool around and gets into mischief every day. Therefore, his parents often scold him, as Squidward does with SpongeBob and Patrick: “They’re only making a joke and they get trouble anyhow.”

#### **Child-typical: action and perspective**

Contrary to the adults’ world, SpongeBob acts in ways which are typical for children. He is not only spontaneous and emotionally impulsive, but he also has fun, plays tricks and gets involved in “cool things”. That way, 6-year-old Matthias justifies the choice of SpongeBob as favourite figure: “Because he is the wittiest, he tells jokes and rings the bell and runs away and I always like that ... I do doorbell pranks sometimes, too ... I like funny things, too.” Children recognise their own behaviour in SpongeBob, such as doing something just for the fun of it and enjoying it. The programme takes up another important dimension of being a child: play as the philosophy of life. “They are always together because they always play with each other, playing such fun things.” SpongeBob’s actions are fun-orient-

ed, not goal-oriented; they provide amusement and express amusement. The show is imaginative, creative and exempt from reality's rules. SpongeBob approaches things with a childlike attitude and enthusiasm and the joy of doing something. He is positive to the core and cuts his own path. He looks



"SpongeBob beams with joy because he sees the rainbow" (Nadine, 5 years old)

at the world from his own perspective and his tendency to ignore whatever judgement from the outside creates comical moments. For instance, he does not notice how he gets onto the grumpy octopus Squidward's nerves. The character SpongeBob symbolises the egocentric look at the world of the "big ones". He is focussed on his own perspective which he naturally assumes for everybody else as well.

"SpongeBob always tries hard" and consistently tries in a very positive way – from the child's point of view of the world – to be on his best behaviour. He never consciously means harm. In the case that he does do something wrong, he always regrets it at once and tries to make up for it.

### Recognising own experiences

Drawing from the characters, their actions and their perspective, children recognise their own experiences and adventures from their everyday life in the stories. Hence, as much as the stories may seem bizarre, they represent typical experiences for children. In the interview, 5-year-old Pascal gives a detailed account of one episode of the series. He explains that SpongeBob loses his home and therefore has to move back in with his parents. Patrick tries to avoid the separation by clinging to the back of the car with which SpongeBob is picked up, since "he didn't want SpongeBob to go away, he is his only best friend". As it turns out, the retold television

story does carry a special meaning for Pascal. "Tim also went away from kindergarten; he goes to another kindergarten ... he was my very best friend." Here, the episode not only mirrors the issue "being left by a friend" but right through its over-representation the "emotional reality" of the children. By connecting everyday life experiences to the show, the children recognise their own feelings, issues and experiences like the loss of a best friend in the stories of SpongeBob.

### Combining the familiar and the desired

There are things in SpongeBob's fantastic underwater world that are not possible or allowed in the children's reality and are often irrational and incomprehensible for adults. But exactly those moments of absurdity make the series attractive to children. A creative combination of the familiar and the desired is for example the snail Gary. The animal mixes different skills and characteristics that children know and like. SpongeBob keeps a snail as pet. Gary is beautifully coloured and meows like a cat, you can play with him, he retrieves things like a dog, you can go on a walk with him, he has a running wheel like a hamster and you can take care of him. Thanks to his manifold characteristics the meaning of this character is left open. This openness offers the children space for their wishes and imaginations (cf. Götz et al., 2005; Neuß, 2003). Each child

can fill this character with its own ideas, be it in the role of a pet or as a friend to play with.

SpongeBob embodies the typical child on the one hand, namely that what children know about themselves, on the other hand, he possesses many skills and possibilities that children wish for. This way, he not only offers links to their own issues but leaves them space for their imagination. In SpongeBob's own words: "With a good amount of imagination, I can be anything I want."<sup>3</sup>

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This means, the format reaches an average of 400.000 children in Germany. During Super RTL's holiday programming in April 2007 the series was also broadcast in the mornings and reached a market share of 52 % among the 3- to 13-year-olds. Source: Press office Super RTL.

<sup>2</sup> The interviews were conducted in 2005 by the author in 3 kindergartens and day-care centres in urban and rural areas in Germany.

<sup>3</sup> SpongeBob in episode 44, story 2: "The movie in your head."

### REFERENCES

Götz, M. et al. (2005). *Media and the make-believe worlds of children. When Harry Potter meets Pokémon in Disneyland*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Holler, A. (2005). *Die Bedeutung von Fernsehensendungen und deren Figuren für Vorschul Kinder. Eine qualitative Studie am Beispiel der Serie "SpongeBob Schwammkopf"*. Unveröffentlichte Masterarbeit. Lehrstuhl Medienpädagogik, Universität Augsburg.

Neuß, Norbert. *Gaps for fantasy in children's films – Television and the aesthetic of reception*. In: *TelevIZion*, 16/2003/1, pp. 22-27.

### THE AUTHOR



Andrea Holler, M. A., studied media education, psychology and sociology. She is freelancer at the IZI with main focus on programmes for preschoolers.