

# SpongeBob plush toy: being popular promises success

He is yellow, he is square, and since he has had his first appearance in August 2002, German children’s television without him has become unimaginable: SpongeBob. Ever since marine biologist and cartoon specialist Stephen Hillenburg came up with the idea for the show, *SpongeBob SquarePants* has been nothing but a success – in 2009 the show, which is produced by the American broadcasting station Nickelodeon, celebrated its 10 year anniversary. Worldwide, a large number of license holders offer products with the merry sponge. But not only is he omnipresent in stores and supermarkets, various children’s programmes also air numerous episodes of the show every day. The main target group are children on primary school level, but the sponge has also reached a high level of popularity in kindergarten.

For a study 53 kindergartners, 45 TV experts working at public broadcasting stations, and 29 educators evaluated 12 licensed plush toys. They chose their favourite and least favourite toy.

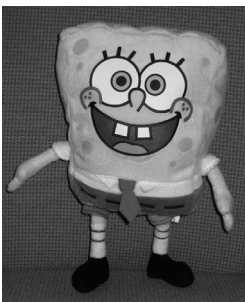
For 3- to 6-year-olds, SpongeBob is – beside Bob the Builder – the most popular licensed toy the study has dealt with. But some kids do not like him and chose the sponge to be their least favourite plush toy. The character SpongeBob therefore caused the most discordance among the children, i.e. the number of children that voted for SpongeBob as their favourite toy equals the number of those who consider him a “loser”. His appearance, which is fairly popular because of the TV show, as well as the availability through licensed products, are important aspects of the reception.



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### The children’s positive comments

- “He laughs, he’s yellow, the tie is good. I got the same one, just bigger.” (boy, 5 years old)
  - “I always watch him. That he looks so spongy, the yellow. He’s got funny eyes, big lashes.” (boy, 3 years old)
  - “I know him well, he’s often on TV and he’s always doing funny stuff.” (boy, 3 years old)
  - “He’s funny, there’s also a balloon of him.” (girl, 4 years old)
- One boy (3 years old) just points at his SpongeBob socks instead of giving a statement.



### The children’s negative comments

- “I hate SpongeBob! He’s for boys, because he is one.” (girl, 6 years old)
- “I don’t like his teeth sticking out like that.” (boy, 5 years old)
- “I just don’t like him, not even on TV.” (boy, 4 years old)
- “My mom doesn’t think he’s nice and I don’t think he’s nice either, but I like him on TV.” (girl, 6 years old)



SpongeBob: TV character (top), ca. 25 cm SpongeBob plush toy (middle), interview situation at the kindergarten (bottom)

### The educators’ comments

- The SpongeBob plush toy scores badly with all the educators. In many cases a criticism of quality and looks of the plush toy goes along with a general disapproval of the show itself.
- “Bad fabric, not lifelike, horrible face. A horrible show, the character is too fidgety.”
  - “The toy is too small, the fabric is not soft, the facial expression is not neutral. I don’t think that it is a good show for kids.”
  - “For me, this plush toy represents a pedagogically inappropriate kids’ show which is rather made for adults.”
  - “The face looks unreal and artificial; it is just painted or ironed on.”
  - “Not a character for children. Kids don’t understand the sarcasm and irony of the show.”

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 Source: Study “Gefährten der Kindheit” [“Childhood companions”]  
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