Can You Tell Me How to Get to Early Literacy?:

“Sesame Street” and the Acquisition of Early Literacy Skills in the Preschool Years

Rachel Balko

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Dr. Jim Anderson

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Introduction: Why “Sesame Street”?

One of the ongoing debates among teachers, librarians, and others involved in the education of young children is whether—and how—e-books and other interactive digital technologies are a help or a hindrance in helping children to acquire early literacy skills. Guernsey (2011) sums up the arguments succinctly:

Are electronic picture books good for kids, and can they get them hooked on reading by expanding access to engaging titles? Or are digital books one more step down that slippery slope to less and less interaction with print just when children need it most? (para. 4)

More than 40 years ago, the same kinds of questions were being asked about television and its potential as a tool for mass education—or mass hypnosis. In this review, I will examine the literature regarding the impact of one particular television program, “Sesame Street,” on the acquisition of early literacy skills in young children. I chose to focus on “Sesame Street” for a number of reasons:

- **Longevity & Critical and Public Acclaim:** Premiering in 1969, “Sesame Street” is the longest-running children’s television program in the United States (Broder, 2009, para. 1), and as of 2010, had won more Emmy awards than any other show in U.S. history (Sesame Workshop, n.d., para. 3). In 2008, Children Now, “a nonpartisan research and advocacy organization working to raise children’s well-being to the top of the national policy agenda” (Children Now, 2008, p. 30), gave “Sesame Street” an “exemplary” rating (p. 9) for the quality of its “primary educational message … using an index of educational value based on six key criteria: clarity, integration, involvement, applicability, importance, and positive reinforcement” (p. 11).

- **Broad Reach:** More than six million children watch the program each week (Sesame Workshop, n.d., para. 3), and “Sesame Street” is “the most-watched children’s program in history, with more than 90 million graduates in the United States alone” (Sesame Workshop, n.d., para. 1).

- **Explicit Focus on Educational Objectives, Particularly Early Literacy:** The original mission of “Sesame Street” was to help prepare low-income children, who might not have access to “nursery schools and other opportunities for formal early educational experiences”
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(Lesser & Schneider, 2001, p. 26), for school. Indeed, when Joan Ganz Cooney, the series creator, first sought funding for the project from the Carnegie Corporation in 1966, the title of her report was “Television for Preschool Education” (Lesser & Schneider, 2001, p. 26). One of the goals of the first (1969) season was to provide instruction in “symbolic representation” (Lesser & Schneider, 2001, p. 29), including recognition and use of letters, numbers, and geometric forms. The “Sesame Street” curriculum has been revised and expanded over the years, and has included early literacy concepts such as letters and the alphabet; sight words (including Spanish sight words); verbal blending (e.g., consonant blends and digraphs), sound pattern recognition, and phonemes; “literacy goals related to school workbook activities” (Lesser & Schneider, 2001, p. 32); language and vocabulary appreciation; reading in a given context (e.g., for information); reading and writing as enjoyable and useful activities; introduction to various literary forms (including storybook reading); and emergent literacy (Lesser & Schneider, 2001).

- **Breadth and Depth of the Available Research:** The effectiveness of “Sesame Street” on young children’s educational outcomes has been the subject of academic research since its very first season, and the program is “the most researched television show in history,” with “[a] significant body of evidence of the program’s educational value in the United States” (Sesame Workshop, 2013, para. 5). As an example of the size of the research base for the program, my search of the UBC Library website for the search term “‘Sesame Street’ and ‘early literacy’” resulted in 456 results for journal articles, books, and book chapters.

Given the scope of this assignment, I have incorporated only a small portion of the available research on the impact of “Sesame Street” on early literacy in this literature review.

**Young Children and Reading: Where Does “Sesame Street” Fit?**

It is clear from the focus of the “Sesame Street” curriculum that encouraging early literacy is one of the program’s primary objectives (Lesser & Schneider, 2001), but does “Sesame Street” really help children learn to read? Although an unequivocal “yes” cannot be supported by the existing research, several studies of young children and reading and/or school readiness have included questions about whether these children were regular viewers of “Sesame Street,” and the
findings are noteworthy.

In Jackson, Donaldson, and Cleland’s (1988) study of “precocious readers” (defined as kindergarteners who were reading at or above a third-grade level and who were “not old for their grade” [p. 235]), parents of 51 of the 87 study participants (approximately 59 percent) reported that their child had first watched “Sesame Street” at the age of 2 years or younger; only one parent reported that their child had never watched the show. Thus, early viewing of “Sesame Street” appears to be associated with exceptional reading achievement in kindergarten. However, generalizing this finding is problematic because this study was conducted with a limited population. The researchers’ “impression was that the composition of the sample reflected that of the predominantly white, middle-class communities from which it was drawn” (Jackson et al., 1988, p. 235)—socioeconomic and ethnic information was not formally collected—rather than representing an economically and ethnically diverse population. The age of the Jackson et al. (1988) study—it was conducted in 1981 and 1982—is another limitation in generalizing its results today; however, a much larger study, conducted a decade later, also found an association between watching “Sesame Street” and emergent/early literacy, which strengthens the claim that early exposure to the program may improve reading skills in young children.

The 1993 National Household Education Survey, a national telephone survey commissioned by the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education, featured several questions on school readiness, including four that specifically addressed children’s viewing of “Sesame Street” (Zill, 2001). The survey obtained information from the parents of 4,423 preschool children and 2,126 kindergartners from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic levels, and geographic areas across the United States (Zill, 2001). Findings specific to young children’s viewing of “Sesame Street” included:

- Watching “Sesame Street” was a common activity for more than 6.6 million preschool children, 77 percent of whom watched at least once per week, and almost 2.4 million
kindergartners, 60 percent of whom watched “regularly” (not specifically defined; Zill, 2001, p. 118).

- Large majorities of African American (87 percent), Latino (77 percent), and European-American (74 percent) preschool children were described as “current viewers” (Zill, 2001, p. 119), as were 77 percent of preschoolers whose mothers spoke Spanish and 67 percent of preschoolers whose mothers spoke an Asian language (Zill, 2001). This wide viewership of “Sesame Street” indicates that the potential early literacy benefits of the program may be experienced by children of various ethnic backgrounds, including those whose first language is not English.

- Among four-year-olds who watched “Sesame Street” at least once per week, 59 percent recognized most of the letters of the alphabet, as compared with 52 percent of non-viewers, and 76 percent “told connected stories when pretending to read” as compared with 71 percent of non-viewers (Zill, 2001, p. 120).

- “Viewing Sesame Street once a week or more often was a significant predictor of the child’s score on the emergent literacy and numeracy index” (Zill, 2001, p. 123) even after controlling for the effects of socioeconomic factors such as parent education, family income levels, and the mother’s primary language, among others.

These studies indicate that emergent/early literacy skills are associated with young children watching “Sesame Street” regularly, and although the primary focus of this literature review is the development of early literacy, it is interesting to note that the benefits of early viewing of “Sesame Street” appear to continue into adolescence. When Anderson et al. (2001) followed up with 570 adolescents “who had been studied as preschoolers in one of two separate investigations of television use” (p. vii), “Sesame Street” viewing at age 5 years was positively related with book use as a teenager, as well as being a positive predictor for high school grades in science and math for both boys and girls, and in English for boys, but not for girls—the reason for the gender differential is unclear (Anderson et al., 2001). Interestingly, watching other educational programs during early childhood was not a predictor of grades in high school, suggesting that the better grades were “primarily due to Sesame Street viewing” (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 54).
What Are These Children Watching?: Content Analyses of “Sesame Street”

From its inception, the creators and producers of “Sesame Street” have pursued explicit educational goals (Lesser & Schneider, 2001), one of which is to “[d]evelop early language and literacy skills such as letter knowledge, vocabulary, and reading and writing fundamentals” (Sesame Workshop, 2009, para. 3). However, good intentions do not always lead to good results. In order to gauge the impact of “Sesame Street” on early literacy, it is important to evaluate the content of the program, as it is the material presented that actually influences the acquisition of early literacy skills in young children—or not.

In Mates and Strommen’s (1995) analysis of 10 one-hour episodes of the 1992–1993 season of “Sesame Street” for messages about literacy, their findings were less positive than might be anticipated, given the program’s status as an icon of children’s educational programming. Literacy messages were defined as “[a]ny bit that included a description, discussion, or example of activities or skills related to written language” (Mates & Strommen, 1995, p. 302). Of the 350 segments the researchers viewed, 184 literacy messages were identified; 81 of these were considered to have a “literacy-related central message” and 53 were classified as having a “literacy-related peripheral or incidental message” (Mates & Strommen, 1995, p. 302).

In the 10 “Sesame Street” episodes they analyzed, Mates and Strommen (1995) identified the following literacy-related themes:

- The primary literacy focus was on identifying individual letters (and in one case, a digraph) and their sounds, with insufficient attention paid to “the goal of making sense of print” (p. 303).
- Almost no environmental print was represented, despite the facts that a realistic portrayal of the program’s “urban neighborhood” setting would likely include such print (e.g., signs, posters) and that “environmental print is often the first print children recognize” (p. 303).
- Reading and writing were not depicted in activities of daily life that would naturally use these skills (e.g., list-making, reading a menu), and several segments gave the impression
that “knowing how to read and write is neither helpful nor rewarding” (p. 303).

- Reading was presented as being less enjoyable than other activities. The researchers provided examples in which characters who display an interest in literacy-related activities (e.g., reading, going to the library) are persuaded by others to engage in other, “more fun” activities.

- Children’s literature was not read aloud, and when children’s stories were dramatized, they were presented in colloquial, rather than literate language; this deprived young children of the opportunity “to hear the language of books” (p. 304).

- The development of new vocabulary and general knowledge was strongly supported through the introduction and labeling of “[m]any new objects and experiences” (p. 304). English–Spanish bilingualism and Spanish vocabulary development were also encouraged.

With the exception of one of the literacy themes identified (i.e., awareness and appreciation of bilingualism), Mates and Strommen’s (1995) analysis identified several areas in which the literacy messages embedded in “Sesame Street” could use improvement. These criticisms are important to consider, with the possible exception of the researchers’ concern about the program’s emphasis on individual letters and the sounds they make. Mates and Strommen (1995) found fault with the “Sesame Street” approach of presenting “one-syllable words with the initial consonant or digraph detached” (p. 302) and then blending the sounds together, citing research claims that “the idea that letters represent the sounds in spoken words is a difficult principle for preschoolers to grasp” (p. 302).

However, current thought about emergent literacy supports the encouragement of both phonological awareness (i.e., “the ability to attend to and manipulate units of sound in speech” [Yopp & Yopp, 2009, p. 13]) and phonemic awareness (i.e., “the ability to attend to and manipulate phonemes, the smallest sounds in speech” [Yopp & Yopp, 2009, p. 13]) in young children because “[a] child’s ability to reflect on language itself, specifically the sounds of language and especially the phonemes, supports the child’s understanding of the logic of the written code” (Yopp & Yopp, 2009, p. 15). If the current emphasis on phonological and phonemic awareness in emergent and
early literacy acquisition is well founded, then the attention paid to individual letter sounds in the “Sesame Street” episodes analyzed by Mates and Strommen (1995) could be viewed as a strength rather than a weakness.

In a more recent analysis of portrayals of print literacy in children’s television programs, Moses and Duke (2008) randomly selected eight episodes of each of the 10 most-watched television programs for children between the ages of 2 and 5 years for the 2002–2003 viewing year, according to the Neilsen Media Research TV Ratings. “Sesame Street” was the fifth most-watched program for this age group (Moses & Duke, 2008). The intent of the analysis was a “systematic examination of literacy events and specific qualities of these events,” including “the dialogue, people, actions, and situations that surrounded characters’ interactions with print” (Moses & Duke, 2008, p. 260). The researchers defined print literacy events as “any time alphabetic print appeared and was read, written, and/or listened to by characters or a narrator in an episode” (Moses & Duke, 2008, p. 261).

Moses and Duke (2008) identified a number of overall features of the literacy content of all 10 most-watched television shows in the aggregate, including:

- Little print literacy was represented, these representations “used a limited set of texts” (p. 269), and characters were rarely depicted as engaged in writing.
- Many of the literacy events showed “characters using print for authentic purposes” (p. 269). “Authentic literacy events” were defined as those in which the text being read or written, and the purpose for reading or writing the text were similar to those used by people “outside of school” contexts (p. 265).
- After excluding segment titles and messages about the broadcasting station, 35 percent of the literacy messages were positive (i.e., “showing reading and writing as enjoyable, useful, or important” [p. 278]), 6 percent were negative (i.e., “print seemed less important than other activities, less enjoyable than other activities, or not useful” [p. 278]), and 59 percent were neutral.
- There were many missed opportunities for including print “in meaningful ways” (p. 269; i.e., represented print was not legible, items that normally would have print [e.g., books] were presented without print, “print would normally be used to accomplish a task but [it]
was not” [p. 266]).

To remain within the scope of this literature review, I will highlight Moses and Duke’s (2008) findings about the presentation of literacy that were specific to “Sesame Street:”

- Of the 461 print literacy events represented in all 10 programs, “Sesame Street” incorporated 20 percent of these. Only “Arthur,” another public television program, scored higher, representing 24.9 percent of the total number of print literacy events.
- “Sesame Street” was ranked highest for the amount of “time spent in print literacy events,” accounting for 22 minutes and 23 seconds (31.4 percent) of the 1 hour, 11 minutes, and 11 seconds spent on print literacy events across all 10 programs (p. 269).
- After excluding segment titles and messages about the broadcasting station, the most common type of interaction with print was the representation of an isolated letter or word. Across all 10 programs, “Sesame Street” accounted for 71 percent of these isolated letter/word literacy events.
- While writing was the least common type of literacy event, “[o]ne of the reoccurring literacy events with writing happened during the introduction of [the] ‘Elmo’s World’ [segment]” (p. 273).

In contrast with the work of Mates and Strommen (1995), Moses and Duke’s (2008) content analysis is much more positive in its evaluation of how “Sesame Street” represents literacy. Although there are many potential reasons for this (including the possibility that the literacy content of the program’s 2002–2003 season could have been substantially different from that analyzed by Mates and Strommen a decade earlier), one important consideration is the basic orientation of the researchers’ analyses.

Mates and Strommen (1995) evaluated “Sesame Street” in light of “[a] growing body of research on emerging literacy” (p. 300), particularly the idea that “[t]wo strategies dominate children’s efforts to understand the nature of written language: exploring the uses of written language in social contexts and giving meaning to print” (p. 301). On the other hand, Moses and Duke (2008) analyzed the literacy content of “Sesame Street” in relation to other popular television programs.
shows for preschoolers, including educational and purely entertainment-oriented programs (e.g., “Spongebob Squarepants”) on both public and commercial stations. When Mates and Strommen held “Sesame Street” to a research-oriented pedagogical standard of literacy education, it was viewed as inadequate; when Moses and Duke compared “Sesame Street” to other children’s programming, it was seen to be a clear leader in literacy promotion.

Both positions have validity: As a substitute for traditional, explicit literacy instruction, “Sesame Street” may be found wanting, but among children’s television programs, its literacy content is exceptional.

How Is It Working?: The Efficacy of “Sesame Street” in Early Literacy Development

In 1989, the Children’s Television Workshop (the producers of “Sesame Street,” now known as Sesame Workshop) commissioned the “Early Window Project” to study the impact of “Sesame Street” on children’s academic and social skills; the investigation was conducted independent of the producers, and the researchers were assured “the right of publication regardless of the findings” (Wright, Huston, Scantlin, & Kotler, 2001, p. 100). “More than 250 families with a preschool child participated during the years from 1990 to 1993” (Wright et al., 2001, p. 102) in the longitudinal study, in which the researchers followed low- to moderate-income children from three ethnic groups (i.e., Latino [approximately 20 percent], African American [approximately 40 percent], white [approximately 40 percent]) for the time period from ages 2 to 5 years (i.e., the younger cohort) or from ages 4 to 7 years (i.e., the older cohort). Each family provided 24-hour time-use diaries several times each year, as well as yearly reports on television viewing frequencies (Wright et al., 2001). Thus, these findings represent the effect of “Sesame Street” on children’s literacy in the context of a “real life” home environment, rather than in a controlled, experimental context.

As the subject of this literature review is the effect of “Sesame Street” on early literacy
acquisition during the preschool years, I will focus on Wright et al.’s (2001) findings for the younger cohort, which included:

- “Sesame Street” was the most frequently viewed educational program, representing approximately 80 percent of all educational programming watched.
- The average child watched “Sesame Street” slightly more than two hours per week at ages 2 to 3 years, which declined to approximately one hour per week for ages 4 to 6 years.
- Families whose first language was Spanish watched more “Sesame Street” than those whose first language was English; “[s]ome parents said they considered Sesame Street especially helpful for learning English, themselves” (Wright et al., 2001, p. 106).
- After controlling for the effects of family variables (i.e., mother’s level of education, English or Spanish as the primary home language, family income/needs ratio, score on the Home Observation Measure of the Environment [the standard instrument for evaluating a child’s home environment for support of cognitive and educational development]) and the child’s initial vocabulary level, watching “Sesame Street” from ages 2 to 3 years was found to be a “consistent positive predictor of preacademic skills up to and including age 5” (Wright et al., 2001, p. 109), including those measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test—Revised and the Letter Word Recognition subtest of the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement.

Overall, regular viewing of “Sesame Street” was correlated with the acquisition of early literacy skills among the preschoolers in the Wright et al. (2001) study, including those for whom the family’s first language was Spanish, rather than English.

Similar results were found in an oft-cited 1990 study, in which Rice, Huston, Truglio, and Wright examined whether preschoolers gained new vocabulary words when viewing “Sesame Street” under “normal home viewing conditions” (p. 421). The researchers collected television viewing diaries every six months over a period of two years for “[t]wo cohorts of children who were within 3 months of their third and fifth birthdays at the onset of the study” (Rice et al., 1990, p. 422). The majority of the study participants were white and had both parents living in the home, although the sample represented a range of occupational and educational levels (Rice et al., 1990). The children’s frequency of viewing was calculated for four types of television shows (i.e.,
children’s informative programs, children’s noninformative programs, adult informative programs, adult noninformative programs); the frequency of children’s viewing specifically for “Sesame Street” was determined separately (Rice et al., 1990).

As with the Wright et al. (2001) study, I will focus on the results from the younger cohort (i.e., ages of 3 to 5 years [n = 160]). Highlights of Rice et al.’s (1990) findings include:

- “Sesame Street” was the most-watched children’s informative program, accounting for 73 percent of the category.
- “Early viewing” (i.e., at ages 3 to 3-1/2 years) of “Sesame Street” correlated significantly to vocabulary scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test—Revised at age 5, and children who were frequent viewers of “Sesame Street” during the age range of 4 to 5 years had higher vocabulary scores than those who were not.
- There appeared to be “a cumulative effect [on vocabulary development] of ‘Sesame Street’ viewing during the age period from 3 to 5” (p. 425), although this effect declined after the age of 5 to 5-1/2 years.
- Most of the children’s viewing (74 percent) occurred without a parent in the room, which suggests that the increases in vocabulary were due to the content of the program, rather than to parental interaction. On the contrary, “early coviewing [with a parent] did not predict later vocabulary, but early viewing of the 3-year-olds without an adult present did predict their vocabulary levels at age 5” (p. 426).
- The children’s increases in vocabulary related to viewing “Sesame Street” seemed to be independent of factors such as family size, level of parental education, the child’s gender, and parental attitudes about their child’s television viewing. However, the researchers acknowledged that it is more likely that these variables were similar within the study groups, than that these factors do not play a role in the children’s vocabulary development.

Rice et al.’s (1990) work demonstrates a correlation between viewing “Sesame Street” with vocabulary development, especially during a child’s third year of age, without parental intervention, and separate from the influence of socioeconomic factors.

In contrast, Linebarger and Walker’s (2005) analysis of parents’ logs of their young children’s television viewing habits did not find the strong correlations between “Sesame Street”
viewing and vocabulary development that either the Walker et al. (2001) or Rice et al. (1990) studies did. Study participants (n = 51) were children from predominantly middle- to upper-middle-class families, 90 percent of whom were what the researchers identified as “Euro-American” (Linebarger & Walker, 2005, p. 627). Parents provided television viewing logs every three months from the time their child was six months old until the child was 30 months old (Linebarger & Walker, 2005). These logs reported the number of hours of television the child watched each week, which programs the child watched, how many days per week the child watched each program, and how long the child watched each program each day (Linebarger & Walker, 2005). The researchers coded the programs as to whether the intended audience was children or adults, and by program type (e.g., sports, entertainment, informative), and analyzed the data according to the following categories: a) total television, b) program type (i.e., child entertainment, child informative, adult), and c) specific children’s programs (Linebarger & Walker, 2005).

Linebarger and Walker’s (2005) findings specific to “Sesame Street” viewing included:

- Children began viewing “Sesame Street” at approximately nine months of age, and the number of minutes watched increased steadily until the age of approximately 27 months, when it decreased slightly.
- “Sesame Street” viewing was unrelated to the growth of the child’s vocabulary as measured by the MacArthur Communicative Development Inventory.
- Watching “Sesame Street” was negatively related to expressive language production as measured by the Early Childhood Indicator. At 30 months of age, viewers used 1.49 fewer single- and multiple-word utterances, and experienced a decrease of 0.13 words per month in their vocabulary growth rate as compared with non-viewers.

The researchers speculated that the negative association between “Sesame Street” and vocabulary growth could be due to “the loose narrative structure of the program and the changing vignettes [that] do not provide enough supports for comprehension of the content or learning of new vocabulary words for infants and toddlers” (Linebarger & Walker, 2005, p. 640).
A number of factors could explain the marked difference in the findings of Linebarger and Walker (2005) regarding the relationship of “Sesame Street” viewing and children’s vocabulary development and those of both Wright et al. (2001) and Rice et al. (1990). For example, as with the Mates and Strommen (1995) and Moses and Duke (2008) content analyses, the literacy-related content of the “Sesame Street” program, and the format in which it was presented, could have changed significantly during the considerable time lapse—more than a decade—between the Linebarger and Walker study and the Rice et al. and Walker et al. investigations, and any such changes could have affected the program’s impact on language acquisition.

One of the potentially most significant differences among the Linebarger and Walker (2005), Rice et al. (1990), and Walker et al. (2001) investigations is the ages of the children being studied. Generally speaking, “[c]hildren show rapid growth in oral language abilities from ages 3 to 5, [which is] the target age range for the content presented in ‘Sesame Street’” (Rice et al.,1990, p. 426). It could be that the negative relationship between “Sesame Street” and vocabulary acquisition found by Linebarger and Walker (2005) is, at least partially, a function of the children’s very young age; the program’s content may simply be too advanced to have a positive effect on the vocabulary development of children from six to 30 months of age. Accordingly, the positive results found in the other two studies could be attributed, to some extent, to a good “match” between the ages of the children studied (i.e., ages 2 to 5 years for Walker et al., ages 3 to 5 years for Rice et al.) and the intended cognitive/developmental level of the “Sesame Street” material.

**So What Do We Do?: Implications for Practice**

While the Walker et al. (2001), Rice et al. (1990), and Linebarger and Walker (2005) studies provide useful data on how “Sesame Street” can help young children develop early literacy skills through “normal” home viewing, a study by Roseberry, Hirsh-Pasek, Parish-Morris, and Golinkoff (2009) demonstrated how children aged 30 to 42 months can learn verbs through live interaction
with an adult in conjunction with viewing a “Sesame Street”–based videorecording. The design and results of this investigation may be particularly useful to early childhood educators who are interested in using television programs and/or videorecordings as part of their early literacy instruction practices.

Roseberry et al. (2009) conducted three studies of 96 children, who were split into two age groups: 30 to 35 months (i.e., the younger cohort) and 36 to 42 months (i.e., the older cohort). In all three studies, videorecordings comprised of “high-quality clips from Sesame Beginnings, a video series produced by Sesame Workshop for children as young as six months” (Roseberry et al., 2009, p. 1363) were used. In all three studies, the children sat on their parent’s lap, and the parents were asked to close their eyes during the video clip to avoid unintentional facilitation of the video lesson. In Study 1, children watched a video clip and then experienced a live interaction with an experimenter that was designed to support the video lesson. In Study 2, children watched a video clip only, and no experimenter was present. In Study 3, children watched a video clip and then watched a videorecording of an experimenter performing the same demonstration as in the live interaction (Roseberry et al., 2009).

Children in the younger cohort were only able to learn a novel verb through a combination of live interaction and the video clip—neither the “Sesame Beginnings” clip alone nor the “Sesame Beginnings” clip plus videorecorded experimenter interaction were sufficient for novel verb learning (Roseberry et al., 2009). The children in the older cohort were able to learn a verb from any of the three techniques, but they could only master a more “Stringent Test [that] was designed to probe successful extension of the novel word” (Roseberry et al., 2009, p. 1366) when the “Sesame Beginnings” clip was accompanied by live interaction with an adult. The most salient finding of these studies is that although children aged 3 years and older were able to acquire literacy skills (i.e., learning a novel verb) through watching a video alone, both the younger and the older cohorts displayed optimal results when the “Sesame Beginnings” clip was coupled with live social support.
This research supports “prior findings that social interaction plays a critical role in word learning” (Roseberry et al., 2009, p. 1373), and underscores the idea that educational programming such as “Sesame Street” can be useful as an instructional tool, but should not serve as a substitute for live interaction with an adult.

In her review of the research on how television does—and does not—support the development of early literacy, Moses (2009) provides evidence and recommendations that support the above conclusion. She offers the following guidelines for how teachers and child care providers can use television and videorecordings in their early literacy education activities:

- **“Establish goals for the programming selected for young children”** (Moses, 2009, p. 85). As with any instructional activity, educators should have a clear intention for using television and/or videorecordings in the classroom. Examples of literacy-based goals that could be facilitated by watching “Sesame Street” (or similar educational programs) include demonstrating that reading and writing are both fun and useful, or introducing new vocabulary in another language (Moses, 2009).

- **“Watch programming with young children”** (Moses, 2009, p. 85). Although there is evidence of positive literacy effects for children watching “Sesame Street” on their own at home (e.g., Rice et al., 1990), it is inappropriate to substitute television/videorecordings for live interaction with a teacher in an educational setting. “[H]aving adults mediate what children see helps children acquire certain skills” and “[c]o-viewing also ensures that adults know what children are seeing and whether the program really benefits them” (Moses, 2009, p. 85).

- **“Use television viewing to supplement, not replace, other literacy experiences”** (Moses, 2009, p. 85). As demonstrated in the Roseberry et al. (2009) study, “[q]uality interactions between adults and young children are critical” and “television and videos/DVDs are best viewed as tools to supplement such essential interactions and experiences” (Moses, 2009, p. 85).

- **“Extend the program’s literacy content and messages”** (Moses, 2009, p. 85). Educators should “focus on the skills highlighted in an episode” in a way that “reflect[s] learning goals” as discussed above (Moses, 2009, p. 85). Given that the research indicates that even literacy-promoting programs such as “Sesame Street” sometimes contain embedded
messages that literacy activities are neither fun nor useful (e.g., Mates & Strommen [1995]), educators should carefully screen videorecordings for such negative messages before using them with their students. If educators do show television programs that contain negative messages about literacy, it is important to explicitly counter such messages; for example, by leading a discussion about how and why a child might find writing frustrating, and how to address that concern (Moses, 2009).

Given the popularity of “Sesame Street” among preschoolers and their parents, it is likely that many young children will come to school with some familiarity with the program and its literacy content. Early childhood educators can use the research on the effects of “Sesame Street” on the acquisition of early literacy skills to inform their classroom practice, using the techniques and strategies that they find work best for their students.
References


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