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כאיה בייט בירל



***The Contribution of Initiated Viewing of
"Rehov Sumsum" to the Social
Perceptions of Kindergarten-Aged Children***

Study conducted for Sesame Workshop – New York

Final Report

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Abstract

Sesame Workshop has long-standing experience with countries in conflict throughout the world. Collaboration with the **Hop! Channel** in Israel has led to the creation of a 40-episode children's educational television program, *Rehov Sumsum* that was produced in Hebrew and partially dubbed into Arabic. This study was commissioned by Sesame Workshop in an effort to examine the contributions of the new series, whose aim was to develop and foster attitudes of mutual respect within Israeli society for the purpose of establishing a tolerant world view and a familiarity with the multicultural fabric characterizing Israeli society.

178 children aged five to six, including Jews from two socio-economic backgrounds, both secular and religious, and urban and rural Arabs, were exposed to initiated viewing in their kindergartens, conducted twice a week over a period of ten weeks. The findings were collected through structured half-hour individual interviews, held in two waves - before and after the viewing period.

The study examined whether changes occurred in the children after watching *Rehov Sumsum*, focusing on four domains:

1. identification of *Rehov Sumsum* characters; 2. linguistic and cultural diversity; 3. behavior in a democratic society; and 4. learning content - terms, idioms and songs.

The research pointed to learning patterns and to a significant impact of the program on children, primarily in two domains. In the area of identification, significant changes were recorded in the nature and quality of reasons offered by the children to explain their selection of favorite characters – Muppets and human (referred to as “Neighbors” in this report). In the domain of behavior in a democratic society, it was found that more children chose the path of communication and dialog when dealing with social dilemmas, preferring to take action on their own rather than turning to a third party.

The program was not found to significantly contribute in the two other domains. In the domain of cultural and linguistic diversity, it seems that lack of contribution had to do with the only partial characterization of the characters (as Jewish or Arab, speakers of Russian or Amharic), as well as with the fact that none of these characterizations were apparent at all in the episodes dubbed into Arabic. As far as the domain relating to learning from the program - terms, idioms and songs, it seems that the program's contribution was insignificant due to insufficient exposure.

In view of these findings, it appears that an improved characterization of the characters as well as broader exposure to certain topics might also yield a significant contribution from the program in these areas. Moreover, episodes dealing with the most significant cultural differences in Israel, i.e., the different native languages of Jews and Arabs, must be concurrently produced in both languages.

A notable finding that was examined only after viewing and not directly in relation to the contributions of the program, points to the fact that more than half of the Jewish children and an absolute majority of the Arab children held neutral attitudes towards the games children from the other sector play. Additionally, negative attitudes towards the games of the other sector's children were negligible among the Jewish children and non-existent among Arab children. These findings seem encouraging in view of the available literature, which describes prejudices and hatred of foreigners even from an exceptionally young age, and further reinforce the belief in the need for television broadcasts that can fortify and deepen familiarity among different sectors of society.