

Sesame St. HIV

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Snuffleupagus, a character in the South African children's programme Takalani Sesame, is being scripted as HIV positive as an early lesson in HIV/AIDS awareness.



Sesame St. HIV "Sesame Street" has always been that sacred piece of television. Sweet, not saccharine, educational but never preachy, it was a gem of children's programming. It was also a universe that was completely relatable to small children -- a place where humans, Grouches, Counts, Cookie Monsters and Big Birds learned about the little things in life. Like tying shoelaces, finding out how lollipops are made, or how a car wash operates. Not that we children understood it all, but we appreciated Sesame Street's desire to always be our teacher.

And now Sesame Street is trying hard to teach another valuable lesson, this time by taking the radical step of introducing an HIV-positive Muppet character to "Takalani Sesame," the South African version of the American television program.

Joel Schneider, president of Sesame Street Workshop, announced to delegates attending the recent 14th International AIDS Conference that the new character will "be lively, alert, friendly, outgoing and HIV-positive."

"She'll be healthy, not sickly," Schneider said. "We want to show children that it's okay to touch [an HIV-positive person], okay to hug, that a person can still be a constructive part of the community."

How the character contracts the virus has not been resolved, although it is reported that IV drug use and unsafe sexual practices will not be among the causes. In addition, government officials in South Africa will disperse educational materials to parents who request them, thus opening up a dialogue for parents and children who otherwise would not have a forum for such discussion.

The HIV-positive Muppet -- developed with the South African Department of Education and the state-controlled South African Broadcasting Corp. -- makes its appearance at a devastating juncture in South Africa. South Africa's HIV epidemic is among the world's largest: 100,000 people die of AIDS each year; 10 percent of its 43 million people are infected with the AIDS virus and 2.4 million children under the age of 15 are HIV-positive. The number of AIDS victims has increased 30-fold since 1990. A United Nations study estimates that more than 6 million will be infected by 2005.

Without a significant AIDS program in place, the U.N. estimates that one in five adults there will die over the next decade.

Compounding the problem is South African President Thabo Mbeki's view that AIDS may not even be caused by HIV. Furthermore, financial aid to South Africa has been minimal, if any. President Bush's AIDS plan, the International Mother and Child HIV Prevention Initiative, earmarks \$500 million in aid for two years, but \$300 million of that will not become available until 2004 -- a lengthy wait considering the growing global rate of infection.

So it makes sense, within this context, to raise awareness about the South African AIDS crisis. That the specter of AIDS has made inroads into the once-innocent realm of children's television is a frightening symptom of the enormity of the problem in South Africa. The thought of using a muppet to deal with HIV would be unthinkable in the United States. (There are no plans at this time to incorporate the character into the American Sesame Street.)

Since its debut in 1969, Sesame Street has proved itself an effective forum for the kinds of things that 3- to 7-year olds naturally ask about: death, divorce and race. But HIV and AIDS goes beyond the realm of comprehension of most American kids. In this country, young children are occupied with more simplistic notions, like the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, Play-Doh and dolls, music and naps.

The introduction of the HIV-positive Muppet rudely brings home the sad fact that AIDS is very much a part of everyday life for the average South African kid -- who probably knows more about death and loss than any 5-year-old should; not to mention about social isolation and fear. The transmission rate of the AIDS virus from mother to child is around 20 percent without drug cocktails such as AZT. Activists say AIDS patients are treated as social pariahs by South Africans, who reject them out of fear and ignorance.

Hopefully the Muppet may help destigmatise the disease or at the very least, yield a lesson of compassion. And Sesame Street executives say they will treat the character with sensitivity and care.

"One of the scripts that's in testing right now is the character is sad because some children whom we don't see won't play with her," says Robert Knezevic, head of the company's international division. "The characters on the set rally around her and deliver some information such as 'Don't these kids know that you can't catch HIV just by playing with you?' and 'We'll play with you,' etc., and then they go off and play together."

Though conservative commentators in the U.S. are shaking a finger at "Takalani Sesame" for exposing young children to an issue linked to sexuality, they should be more realistic. The HIV-positive Muppet should remind everyone of the deadly toll that international negligence imposes on the lives of African children, who have lost parents, siblings, friends and in some cases entire families to this deadly disease. It's a valuable Sesame Street lesson for us all, regardless of our age.

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