

The Child and the Remote: A Description of the Dynamic  
Relationship Formed Between a Child and Sesame Street

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**Introduction**

Children actively develop relationships with their parents, peers, teachers and their environment. The people, places and things in the child's most intimate ecosystems afford many opportunities to develop and cultivate meaningful relationships. As interactive media continues to grow and more and more characters are speaking directly with children on their tablets and televisions, children begin developing dynamic and multidimensional relationships with the screens in their lives. This research is committed to better understanding the relationship that children develop with the highly interactive educational television show *Sesame Street*.

While there is much discussion on the topic of children's television viewing, this rhetoric generally ignores the continuation of the relationship when the television is turned off. Further, the research considers the child's role in the relationship to simply be a passive recipient of media. The current study acknowledges that a child is not simply viewing an arrangement of pixels on a piece of plastic in a vacuum. Instead, the child is engaging with a thoughtfully curated library of content sought out within the confines of a power filled relationship between them and their parents. The child is becoming familiar with the characters, responding to them as peers, and developing a relationship with television programs that allows them to blur the lines between their on-screen and off-screen worlds.

In most homes, a colorful and bulky remote control stands as a symbol for power in the decision to turn on the television and select a show to view. The person holding the device is in control of the content on the screen, the volume at which it is played, and the duration the content is shown.

Beyond the obvious, the person holding the remote is responsible for designating a momentary hierarchical importance among the television and the competing stimuli in the environment.

While a child's agency to turn on the television is often restricted, their agency to identify with characters and develop a meaningful internal narrative that is sustained into their off screen world demonstrates an alternative agency. It is this agency that produces the climate in which children can begin developing a healthy and intrinsically motivated relationship with the content on their screens.

Characters on children's television shows are known to engage in interactive dialogue and content designed to socially engage children (Gray 2017). This call and response is the most rudimentary sign of the formation of a relationship between a child and their television. In this study we describe that children laugh more when their favorite character is on the screen and they partake in distracted viewing when they are unfamiliar with the content on the television. It is in these moments of real time reaction that children begin to form their relationship with television. When a child sings a long with a recurring song or enthusiastically waves to their favorite character as they would a friend at a bus stop, they are making the choice to engage in a seemingly bidirectional relationship with the characters and content of the television show. However, the development of an authentic relationship is one that is not restricted to the glass rectangle where the children likely meet the characters. Instead, the relationship includes a continuation of the mentally constructed and represented story lines of the characters that the children most relate with.

The imaginary worlds on screens provide low stakes opportunities for children to practice what

they learned in their off screen lives and mass production provides generalizable material that helps children make sense of their off screen environments. At its core, this means that the mechanisms used to produce quality children's television transform the shows into a uniquely relatable experience. Children engage with conflicts similar to the characters and feel empathy when their colorful friends are sad. Children see a park similar to the one down the street from their house, but an unfamiliar friend in the park on the screen forces them to accommodate their scheme of who belongs in a park. A young child's developmental blur between on-screen and off-screen produces an atmosphere perfect for engaging with creative self-development in a fashion that strongly resembles the way that they would explore themselves alongside a group of peers.

The current literature on this trajectory seeks to quantitatively define a restrictive cap of viewing time in an attempt to protect children from what is perceived as an inability to recognize what is best for themselves. While a quantitative discussion is important, this research seeks to shift the power in the decision away from quantity and away from the agendas of adults. When young children have sufficient agency to engage with the media content they deem as most valuable, they will begin to cultivate a relationship that is capable of supporting their growth across domains in an exceptionally unique way. This research uses a series of interviews and in-home observations to understand why children are watching, how children are watching, and what impact their viewing has on their off-screen lives. This context driven qualitative observation will seek to answer the question: What is the relationship children form with the early childhood television show, Sesame Street?

### **Literature Review**

The literature most relevant to the current study looks at three components of the formation of a relationship between a child and television shows such as Sesame Street. First, much of the literature engaged below discusses the influential motivations behind introducing televisions into children's lives. Second, this review discusses the current television viewing habits of children. Third, it describes the nature of a child's relationship with television that allows them to blur the division between on-screen and off-screen worlds and allows them to generalize their experiences in both worlds across this blurred line.

#### **Why are children watching?**

The role of a television in the lives of children is often mediated by the adults closest to them. There is a constellation of motivators that influence the ways that adults make the decisions to turn on the television, select content, and limit their children's interactions with the two dimensional screen.

Before parents select content or decide how much of the content their children should be watching, they must first decide to include television in their children's lives. For example, 7 out of 10 parents report using television as a babysitter while they prepare meals (Beyens 2014). The decision to turn on the television is rarely motivated by the potential benefits to the child. Instead, parents choose to use television because it keeps children safely occupied, co-viewing (watching TV together with another person (Nielson 2014)) improves communication, and the distractive nature of television regulates children's behaviors (Evans 2011). An alternatively strong motivation for children to view television was the gatekeeping potential seen by parents.

It was easy to control what children viewed and how often they viewed it which made it an ideal form of occupation. However, throughout history, as television sets appeared in homes across the country, the role they played in houses evolved to one of social standing. In response, families took either a socio-orientation stance on television characterized by control and utilizing televisions as a vital piece of communication to help children get along with everyone, or they took a concept orientated stance which was alternatively characterized by affection towards the idea that television stimulates children's ideas and beliefs and should be used to transmit values (Lull 1980).

Similarly, the selection of content is also consistently used as a mediator intended to protect children from the perceived dangers of television. In selecting television content and reporting their motivations, opportunities to learn consistently appear as a strong variable for selection. While only 5% of parents think that education does not belong in television as they see it existing strictly for entertainment purposes, the majority of parents have a desire towards educational television content that supports development. Often used as an example of educational television, 96% of parents reported that *Sesame Street* was very or somewhat educational (Rideout 2014).

The general fear of television that is produced and echoed in each of the child's ecosystems persuades parents to limit the amount of television their children are exposed to. According to Rideout (2014), 31% of parents reported believing that their children were engaged in too much viewing and would prefer to reduce the quantity of viewing. However, there are reported barriers to reducing the amount of television they watch. First, children self-reported that they would act

in defiance if their screen time was restricted, suggesting that children see irreplaceable value in television. Second, parents reported that reductions in television would increase family conflict, supporting the idea that television plays a social role in homes. Third, because television is regularly used to babysit children, parents (especially low income parents) reported lacking the resources to employ alternative strategies to babysit their children (Evans 2011).

When observed, mediations to children's television viewing fall into two categories: time based restrictions and program based restrictions. When children's programs were restricted parental attitudes towards their children watching television increased. In addition, when either program restrictions or time restrictions were in place, the frequency of viewing was higher than when children viewed without restriction (Vandewater 2005).

While the research supports that most children today are watching television as a distractive parenting tool, the content that they are watching is regularly preferred to be interactive and educational. Children are overwhelmingly watching television at the request of their parents so that they can eat, work, or rest in solitude. Any relationship that the child will form with the characters and content of a television show is regularly constructed within the confines of the requests of the child's parents.

### **How are children watching?**

Preschool age children spend more time with television than with any other screen or multimedia in their life (Rideout 2014). Fundamental to this research are two phenomena that occur while a child is actively viewing television. The first is the development of parasocial relationships with

characters described by Jennings (2016) as relationships that appear to be authentic to the child however the character on the television is unaware of the child's existence. The second phenomenon is the development of the child's ability to discern between real and pretend actions on screen (Rideout 2014).

From an early age, children are able to discern between characters they relate to and those that they do not by forming positive parasocial relationships (PPSR) and negative parasocial relationships (NPSR) respectively (Jennings 2016). Children seek out these relationships using moral, social and physical attributes as measurements of social value and relatability, very similarly to the way that they identify friends in their off-screen environments (Kotler 2012). Further, when children talk about their parasocial relationships with characters on television, they use the same language and vocabulary as they do to describe their off-screen peers (Jennings 2016) suggesting a very blurry differentiating line between their perception of parasocial and off-screen relationships.

In these parasocial relationships, which mimic learning relationships traditionally formed with off-screen peers, teachers, and parents, children are able to discriminate between reliable and nonreliable sources of information in pursuit of verifying unobserved truths (Richert 2011). Children then use the combination of reliability and relatability to identify ideal parasocial partners in their relationships which they are then more likely to engage with and learn from.

Kotler (2012) acknowledges that in the creation and utilization of these parasocial relationships, children are engaging in the basic principles of Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, used



to describe off-screen relationships, which posits that children acquire new knowledge alongside peers through the processes of social interaction, imitation and modeling. The parallel between on-screen and off-screen social learning continues to support the idea that the line between parasocial or (on-screen) and off-screen relationships is blurry in the minds of children.

During the developmental period between a child's third and their fifth birthday, they are developing the ability to distinguish between real and pretend occurrences in television shows. Further, as children develop this skill, they begin to claim that the pretend actions in television shows cannot happen in the off-screen world (Richert 2011). However, the same study explains that the authenticity of the parasocial relationships that children form with the reliable and relatable characters of Sesame Street makes it an exception to the rule. Five year olds who would regularly claim that pretend actions seen on TV cannot occur in the off-screen world, do claim that the "pretend" actions they see on Sesame Street are likely to occur off screen (Richert 2011).

### **A Generalizable Impact**

Today, the parasocial relationships children develop with characters over a series of 30 minute blocks are not confined to the television screens in their living rooms. These relationships expand through their homes, their play settings, and their educational settings and have residual effects that follow children through their development. Piotrowski (2013) names the bridging of the gap between on-screen and off-screen worlds, traditionally instigated by a peer or adult, as experiential mediation.

The cultivation of parasocial relationships with characters in children's television shows informs

the decisions children make about the apps, books, and toys they decide to include in their lives. Children above the age of five reported searching for transmedia content (apps, e-books, internet videos, etc.) based on the TV shows that they prefer to watch (Jennings 2016). Further, when asked about the last book that their child read, most often parents reported the book was related to a television show (Jordan 2005). Additionally, in her exploration of the role of television in eating habits, Kotler (2012) describes that children show a significant preference for food that is connected to or branded by a television show with which they have developed a parasocial relationship. Finally, children use the observed experiences and strategies of television characters in their imaginary worlds to resolve their own personal conflicts. Further, while watching television, children construct and manipulate symbolic narratives of television to produce internal scripts which regularly become the settings of the child's play (Cuervo 2013). When asked, 78% of parents reported that their children engaged the content of television shows in their imaginative play (Rideout 2014). These examples expand the potential web of influence of television programs and suggest that a parasocial relationship is fundamental in the influence of many domains of the lives of children.

Children's parasocial relationships with characters have many residual effects. 54% of parents reported seeing residual effects of education television. More specifically, 57% of parents said that the child learned and used a lot about cognitive skills, reading skills, vocabulary, and/or math (Rideout 2014). Most relevant, the social nature or *Sesame Street* combined with the frequency and duration at which a three-year-old watches the show strongly predicts their vocabulary scores at age five independent of several confounding variables (Richert 2011). This prediction is one that can uniquely be claimed by *Sesame Street* which many (Jennings 2016,

Richert 2011, Kotler 2012) would attribute to the depth and reality of the parasocial relationships children form with the reliable and relatable cast. Richert's (2011) recognition of the unique potential of *Sesame Street* to generalize to the child's off-screen world suggests that the television show has an intrinsic experiential mediation that fulfills the role often fulfilled by off screen peers.

### **Methods**

With a phenomenological understanding of the worlds of children, the study is designed around detailed interviews with parents designed to capture their perspectives of their children's relationship with *Sesame Street*. In addition, the study is built around a series of field notes taken during in home observations while children watched *Sesame Street* in their natural setting. The combination of parent interviews and child observations provides a more holistic description of the presence of the relationship with a sample of four (4) children who regularly watch *Sesame Street* and two (2) parents selected via Snowball Sampling. All names in the study are pseudonyms to protect identity.

### **Participants**

Two families participated in this study. One family, the Clarke-Vandstone family engaged in both interviews and observations while the Singh family only participated in interviews. The Clarke-Vandstone family is a middle class family. Cam and Diane (both in their early 30's) are parents to two boys – Peter (4.5 years old) and Tanner (6 years old). Peter attends a private and sought after preschool near their home and Tanner attends kindergarten in a competitive public school (the reason for the family's neighborhood selection). Samaira Singh, the mother of two

daughters (ages 10 and 12), is a middle aged Indian American woman whose children have dual citizenship in both India and the United States.

### **Access**

Samaira was introduced to me by a colleague and we were able to schedule time to interview.

After attaining confirmation that her children had watched Sesame Street when they were younger, the study was presented as a review of the relationship that children from with Sesame Street. We identified a convenient interview location and time and the interview was conducted.

Diane Clarke-Vandstone responded to a post on a social media site that requested parents whose children regularly watch Sesame Street. In our digital correspondence, the study was described as two parts, interviews and observations, but that we would start with the interview. She identified and secured an interview location and during the interview we discussed and agreed on an observation strategy. Tanner and Peter watched Sesame Street at 6:00am and Diane and I decided to introduce the project to the boys at a more convenient hour. The following week, I was invited to meet the children and spent 45 minutes with them during which time I explained that I would be watching Sesame Street with them in the mornings. The four subsequent observations took place at 6:00am in their home where I sat on the couch next to the children in their living room and took notes. Each visit, the children became more comfortable with me and I became less of an alien in their morning routine.

### **Techniques**

The interviews with parents, each approximately one hour long, were conducted in public

settings. Their broad focus was twofold: describe the way their child(ren) consumes television and discuss the decision making process to allow or restrict the child's viewing opportunities. These interviews were digitally recorded, masked for confidentiality, and transcribed. After transcription, the interview recording was destroyed to further mask the identity of the participating families.

The observations were conducted in unaltered settings (with the exceptional addition of an observer). All observations were done during the time and in a place where the children traditionally watch Sesame Street. In addition, they were encouraged to watch on the device (television, laptop, tablet, etc.) that they normally view on. During the observations, the researcher took field notes with a hand written notebook without names or proper nouns to protect identities. After the collection of data, all responses were coded and grouped on the themes of parent motivation, lesson utility, real time viewing response, and child's control in viewing.

### **Challenges**

The small sample size in this study allowed a deep understanding of the momentary detail in the way that children watched Sesame Street. The holistic data collection method inclusive of both interviews and observations further provided momentary detail of the phenomena over time. This formula allows this study to provide a complimentary description of meaning to the field of research generally dedicated to quantitative understanding. It was important to the validity of this study that the research not impede the routine of the participants. The Clarke-Vandstone family did not set alarms to wake their children up, so there were several mornings when I would arrive

and the children slept through observation. To accommodate we rescheduled observations.

While it may seem reductionist to observe only *Sesame Street* (as opposed to any number of other children's television shows), the focus on a single show allowed me much more freedom to compare observations. In addition, the literature reviewed suggests that *Sesame Street* has the most potential to produce an observable relationship between the child and the television program.

## **Background**

### **Television Viewing**

The most recent Nielson (2015) report that looks at the viewing habits of children recognizes a few significant patterns. First, traditional and live television is the preferred viewing method for children. Second, 97% of kids between the ages of 2 and 7 reported watching television or on-demand programming. 89% of children ages 2 to 4 and 90% of children ages 5 to 7 reported watching Children's weekly programming (the category in which *Sesame Street* falls). Third, the report describes that 75% of children 2 to 4 and 68% of children 5 to 7 co-viewed television with another person the majority of which reported co-viewing within the category of "children's weekly programming". Finally, there is a very slight trend away from television as the primary method of media consumption across demographics.

### **Sesame Street**

Parental recognition of the educational capacity of children sprung from a movement in

education in the 1960s and 70s which sought to utilize the amenities available to low income families (televisions) to augment learning in the classroom. What started as classroom lessons based off of the week's regularly scheduled television show, would evolve to an entire lineup of television programs dedicated to supporting children's educational development. In 1969, Sesame Street – the longest lasting example – was created to close the learning gap and break cultural barriers to provide a national discussion (Cain 2017). Now airing on both PBS and HBO, the television show uses a colorful cast of muppets (the iconic style of puppet designed by Jim Henson) as well as a diverse and representative cast of humans to engage children in a series of short segments intended to help children grow smarter, stronger, and kinder (Davis 2008).

### **Researcher**

As the primary field researcher, I am a 25 year-old white cis-male with a bachelor's degree in Children's Studies. In addition, I am completing a dual master's degree in International Educational Development and Human Development. In both academic and professional capacities, I have engaged with the national and international work of Sesame Workshop (the nonprofit behind Sesame Street).

## **Findings**

### **How are children watching?**

Tanner grabs the big grey remote with colorful buttons that is sitting on the black leather couch between him and his brother, Peter. He points it at the dated grey Television, presses the wrong button and says "Why did I do that?" Then he takes a deep breath and rolls back into the couch

with his hand on his head and waits for the TV to turn on. It is 5:58 and when the television finally comes to life a Basketball game is on. Tanner explains that he is waiting for it to come on at 6:00am. He opens the guide and starts scrolling “By the time I find it, it should be 6:00”. By the time Sesame Street showed up on the guide, it was only 5:59am. Tanner scrolled past it the first time and then stopped to go back to where he thought it should be. With the press of a button, Tanner closes the guide and Sesame Street is now playing full screen on the television in the living room while mom takes a shower and Dad is in the kitchen.

The web of societal, parental, and self-motivations has led us to this moment. The children are engaged with Sesame Street. During this routinely observed 30-minute block, the two boys participate in three phenomena that are relevant to the development of a meaningful relationship with the television show.

First, the boys are consistently engaged in episodes of distracted co-viewing. While they sit, stand, and squirm on the black leather couch next to each other each of them phases in and out of focus as they shift focus from the television to conversations with each other and off-screen projects and then shift back. During one observation an ornate “ice-ship” built out of Legos was the source of Peter’s distractions. With a square platform and rudimentary pillars that reached for the sky, it could only have been the product of a child’s imagination. He began disassembling and reassembling it until he was satisfied enough to return his attention to the television. A burst of energy in the form of the physical agitation towards his brother sent the ice ship crashing to its doom on the warm hard wood floors. “You just destroyed your ship” Tanner said with a look of vengeance hoping that this action would teach Peter to stop wrestling with him. Peter looked



down. Defeated, his body melted into Tanner's side as he buried his face in the couch. Without missing a beat, Tanner lost his vengeful look, broke focus from the television to provide comfort, and assured Peter "It's okay, I will build you another one." Peter picked his head up slowly and muttered "right now?" and Tanner said "not right now, I am watching Sesame Street". Peter ended the event by resting his head on Tanner's side and looking at the television alongside as brother as the shattered Ice Ship lay quietly at the base of the couch.

This particular episode was on for a total of 30 minutes from start to finish. Tanner remained focused on Sesame Street for the duration with only a few short breaks (usually to comfort his brother). Peter on the other hand was almost the exact opposite during the show. He was focused on first building an ice ship and second wrestling with his brother but occasionally would break focus to watch the television. The ebb and flow of distractions coupled with the shared nature of co-viewing created a social environment in which the cultivation of any relationship could thrive be it with on-screen characters or those living in the off-screen world.

The second phenomena, and the most overt representation of the development of an on screen, relationship is rooted in the connection between children and the characters that they deem reliable and relatable. In a later observation Tanner relates to one of the blue furry characters with an affection towards cookies named Cookie Monster:

The scene on the television opens with Cookie Monster singing with a low scratchy but friendly voice. Tanner stands on the back of the leather couch slowly rotating his body side to side. Cookie Monster is surrounded by the various characters of the show and the

background of the scene is black. The scene switches to an open oven with a tray of 20 cookies being pulled out of it. Tanner knows what is about to happen. He preemptively states how ridiculous it is that Cookie Monster eats so messy. By this time, Cookie Monster is shoving piles of cookies into his mouth and, as Tanner predicted, most of the cookies can be seen crumbling to the floor. Tanner shakes his head and says “If I was Cookie Monster, I wouldn’t do that!” He then proceeds to show what he would do if he was Cookie Monster. He holds both of his hands pressed against his mouth and opens and closes his mouth in a Pac-man fashion with his eyes closed. At the same time, he shakes his head back and forth. He explains that this would be a better way to actually eat the cookies because that is what Cookie Monster wants.

In this moment, Tanner is demonstrating Sesame Street’s unique ability to inspire generalization from on screen-pretend actions to off-screen real actions. Further, Tanner sympathizes with Cookie Monster when he acknowledges that Cookie Monster must be frustrated because he knows that he wants to eat the cookies but is not succeeding

In a similar moment of character sympathy, Tanner slouches in the couch and reacts to a segment featuring the main character of the show – Elmo, a red furry monster:

“Oh, what are they doing?” he said sarcastically with his hand slapped against his forehead and in a way that made it seem like he was embarrassed for Elmo who was drawing a square on the wall with a crayon. When the square was finished, it revealed a mariachi band and an abandoned drum. He says, again before it begins, oh they have to

tell Elmo how fast to drum. Tanner acts embarrassed for his friend Elmo and then relieved when he understands that the character is not simply committing an act of vandalism.

Tanner is building enough of a relationship with the character that he demonstrates physical embarrassment for his actions. To Tanner, the actions of Elmo appear to be representative of Tanner and, as he would with an off-screen friend, Tanner reacts with a sympathetic response.

In addition to moments of sympathy and relatability, these moments with Tanner demonstrate the third phenomena of developing a relationship with television – Reliability. Richert (2011) explains that reliability is built when a child recognizes a pattern in a sources ability to provide accurate information. In the case of relationship building, Richert (2011) explains that a child's ability to deem a relationship partner as reliable is fundamental to the meaning of the impact and success of the relationship. Further, he explains that repeated imitation of peers is a natural process by which children demonstrate their belief that a source of information is reliable. The scenes that garnered the most reaction were those that were recurring segments in every episode:

Enthusiasm lulled between the two boys who were staring at the television with nearly glazed over eyes until all of the characters showed up dancing and singing on a white screen. Tanner smiled and sighed "Letter of the day, finally." Peter echoed Tanner's sentiments and expressed interest in Letter of the Day. Tanner inquisitively wondered what the letter would be. A large D showed up on the screen. "D... I wonder what they could use 'D' for?" The characters returned to the screen and then the word 'doctor'

appears on the screen. In a near epiphany Tanner says “Oh Doctor! They always choose a letter that they will use.” Peter talks over him and echoes “Doctor”. They watch the song until it is almost over and Tanner explains that they used ‘D’ for Dress-up already and again Peter echoes “yea, D for dress up.”

In a similar moment of identified reliability Tanner and Peter are both watching a recurring segment featuring Cookie Monster:

With complete (not simply echoed) engagement, Peter sees Cookie Monster dancing on the television and singing “how many cookies”. The song lasts for a few seconds and the next shot is a baking tray on the stove with two cookies on it. Before Tanner can answer, Peter picks his head up from his brother’s lap and shouts “TWO!” Tanner affirms him by nodding his head and saying “two.” Peter puts his head back down gently and continues.

In a final moment of reliability building, Tanner sees an uncharacteristic component of the scene and it generalizes it to his own life:

A segment called “Elmo’s world” shows a cartoon TV in Elmo’s room and with a raised eye brow Tanner asks why the TV is there if they aren’t watching anything. He asks the question three times in succession. Each time with more emphasis and finally the TV flickers on and he accepts the action with a simple “Oh” and continues watching. Not only is Tanner demonstrating the reliable nature of this segment by recognizing something out of character, but he is also generalizing to his own life where they only

pay attention to the TV if they are actively watching it (as opposed to using it as background noise).

These examples of reliability forming suggest the level of belief that the boys have in the television show as being a peer that is a valid source of information. They are imitating, engaging, and responding with the content in the segments. In these moments of building reliability with relatable characters in recurring segments within an environment constructed for and by social interaction, the two boys are cultivating a relationship with pretend characters that will expand beyond the confines of the television screen.

### **A Generalizable Impact**

For a relationship to break beyond the physical confines of the television screen, children have to see the value in crafting a meaningful relationship that can exist in both of their on-screen and off-screen worlds. This is the final element of a child's relationship with Sesame Street: generalizability.

In discussing the transition from India to The United States, Samaira explains that the presence of Sesame in the lives of her children supported them in the transition as a peer would:

They do know what they see and when they interact with the younger kids or they interact with their friends, they do bring up things that they watched in India. I think it is shared culture precisely.

Beyond being an influence in the decision to include television in their children's lives, parents reported that children will often engage in conversations with them about the television shows that they watch. For Samaira, these conversations were crucial to introducing television to their lives because they allow her to moderate and mediate the content and lessons received from the content:

I have a lot of conversations with my kids around, what are they watching. And they are allowed to watch everything that they want as long as they can critically engage, 'who are the stereotypes'?

Diane echoed the importance of conversations about content. She mentions that it is in these conversations where it becomes evident that their relationship with television exists both on and off screen:

They will talk about a character as friends, and I'll have to press and find out that it is something that they saw on TV and not something that they experienced in school. I have no idea who it is they are talking about because I don't watch it with them. I don't know the names. They just bring it up like it is somebody that they know.

She discusses one example in which her oldest boy was potty training. When they visited a new venue for an event, Tanner explained that 'Daniel' says there is a bathroom everywhere he goes. After probing, Diane realized that Tanner was talking about Daniel Tiger, a character from the show of the same name. The way that Tanner talked about Daniel was so indistinguishable from

the way that he talks about his off-screen friends that his mother had difficulty distinguishing between the two.

Diane confirms in her interview what would later be seen in observations: the off-screen presence of the boys' favorite television shows would extend beyond the conversations they have with one another. On one site visit, one of these toys made a prominent appearance and highlighted the influence of the social nature of co-viewing:

Peter grabbed only one toy while we were on a tour of their bedroom – a large bright room with bay windows that looked out over a tree lined street. The room had two beds and was quite obviously decorated by their parents who had both studied architecture. The toy was a big plastic bulky watch that lit up. It shot light out of the turn dial on the side. Peter was aiming the beam of light at me and then at my hand. He moved it closer and closer. The energetic 4.5-year-old was focusing and silent for the first time of the tour. Peter persisted with this light for a few more seconds and then his older brother Tanner took a break from sweeping up pretend garbage to come over to us. He grabbed his brother's wrist and explained to him why it wasn't working. Then finally the beam of light produced a picture on the side of my hand, Peter got excited and pushed the front of the watch towards my face so that I could see it was the characters from the TV show Paw Patrol. After fixing his brother's watch, Tanner leaned into my shoulder and explained that he got that watch for his brother because Peter had a Paw Patrol book already and knew that his brother liked the TV show.

This moment highlights that the social atmosphere constructed while viewing where they share a love for the television program and characters translates into the brothers' off-screen social life where interactions are still connected to the reliable and relatable characters that physically disappeared when the television was turned off.

Similarly, Samaira reported regularly seeing her children engage with content off screen. However, she also reported an intergenerational dimension to the relationship. She explains how the children transfer their relationship to the infants and toddlers of her friends when they visit their homes:

They will pull out the shows that they like to pass it on to their younger peers because that is what they remember from their childhood. It left an impact and they would like to share it... I have no idea who it is they are talking about because I don't watch it with them. I don't know the names. They just bring it up like it is somebody that they know.

The generalizable nature of their interactions with television shows is not unidirectional. It is not simply the case that children take what they learn from television and apply it to their off-screen worlds. Children often take what they learn in their off-screen worlds and apply it to their developing on screen relationships. While viewing a scene set at an eye clinic, Tanner blurs the line between real and pretend, on-screen and off-screen as he engages in a comparison between what the characters of the television show are experiencing and what he experienced in a recent health clinic at his school:



Tanner stands up and leans on the back of the couch with the remote still in his hand. He looks at me and smiles through a huge pair of dimples. He says that the scene on the show where Peter's favorite character (Abby Cadabby) takes her friend to the eye doctor reminds him of what happened last week at school. There was a health clinic at his school where they checked his ears with machines that beep. "They know when it's beeping even though they can't hear it and you are supposed to raise your hand every time it beeps." He goes on to talk about the way that they tested his eyes with a pair of glasses. One lens was covered so you could only see with one eye, he demonstrates by pinching his left eye closed and pointing with his right hand at an invisible letter chart. He is still standing on the couch while he paints the scene at the health clinic and he intermittently stops between words to listen to the characters on the screen that are now at the eye doctor.

In this moment, Tanner is engaged in mass generalizing between his on-screen and off-screen worlds. He is blurring the lines as he relates information learned off-screen to on-screen experiences and vice versa. The way that he does this with fluidity demonstrates his perception of the off-screen and on-screen worlds being extremely similar. Even though one is occupied almost exclusively by pretend characters he expects that the experience of the character at the eye doctor will resemble the one that he experienced just weeks before.

Some of the tools they are using at the doctor are familiar and Tanner points them out. He also admits not recognizing some of the tools they are using. He very enthusiastically points out the letter chart they are using to test the prince's vision and notices that the

letter chart has shapes on it “mine was just like that but it had letters instead of shapes”. He holds his fingers close together and tells me that the letters on the bottom were small. He takes a break to watch a few more seconds. Then his eyes get wide and he tells me that there was even a mini sheet and he brings all of the tips of his fingers together on both hands and then squeezes his hands together to show how small the letters were. “but it wasn’t hard” he said with a matter of fact tone.

Tanner was explaining his health clinic day at school, he was comparing it to what he was seeing on TV. There were tools that he didn’t understand but he was able to deduce what they were from context. He would also use the moment to explain how his experience was different from the character (shapes vs. letters, different equipment, etc.) but he fully accepted that the pretend experiences of the characters could occur in the off-screen world.

## **Discussion**

### **On How Children Watch**

Through these observations and interviews, there were two components of creating the social atmosphere in which children could cultivate their relationship with *Sesame Street*. First, children engaged in co-viewing with their siblings. Sitting alongside a friend in the viewing process primed the interaction with the characteristics of a peer to peer engagement. Second, children engaged in distracted viewing with the world around them. Their attention to the screen ebbed and flowed as it competed with the off-screen stimuli in the child’s world. As the children sing along and hold conversations about (and not about) the content on screen, they begin to

generalize the worlds to each other in real time. As this study saw with Tanner and the eye doctor especially, this real time generalizing was the catalyst to a relationship that would exist even when the television is turned off.

Central to constructing the bridge between on-screen and off-screen worlds is the perceived relatability and reliability of the television characters. Characters who are relatable garnered more attention than those that were not and were brought up in conversation more than those with which the child could not relate to. In the case of Peter, he was engaged in deep distracted viewing and would pay attention to the screen only when his favorite characters appeared. In the case of learning from television, the literature reviewed demonstrates that children need to deem a character as being a reliable source of confirming unobserved truths. When Tanner is learning from Abby Cadabby's visit to the eye doctor, he is relating his experiences to her experiences and is expanding his schema for eye exams. Even more, he is talking back to the screen as if he is attempting to adapt Abby's schema for a health and wellness visit.

### **On the generalizable impact**

Once a character is both reliable and relatable, the characters' presence and lessons begin to leap out of the screen and into the child's everyday life as a digital representation of Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory. However, in this case, it is the child's scaffolded relationship with characters on the television that provide meaningful learning opportunities and not the child's off-screen peers. Tanner's on screen and off screen exploration of the eye doctor without human interference represents Sesame Street's ability to act as its own experiential mediator. As the reviewed literature explains, this is the crucial mechanism by which a child is able to generalize

an action on screen to their off-screen world.

One example of the off screen representation occurs in the frequent conversations between parents and children. Parents reported having a strong preference for engaging in conversations with their children about the content that they are watching and, when they are unaware of the content being watched, parents often have a hard time differentiating between off-screen and on-screen peers in these conversations. Not only do children talk about these characters as they do their off-screen friends, but they even reportedly make selections about the characters that they choose to favor in similar ways as they select off-screen peers (gender, personality, morals, etc).

Beyond conversations, these dynamic relationships influence the lives of children across the domains of their lives in ways that resemble the influence of their off-screen peers. The way that children engage with content while the television is on is peer-like as is the way that the characters remain present in their thoughts and actions even when the character is not immediately present. In the cases observed, it begins to be seen that the traditionally analog definition of a learning partner as described by Bandura (1977) is incomplete and needs to be stretched to accommodate for the fluid and dynamic relationships that children form with the characters and content of their favorite television shows.

### **Conclusion**

While not definitive, this research begins to show an evident blur between children's formations of on screen and off screen relationships. With Sesame Street children are developing relationships with reliable and relatable characters in ways that strongly resemble the formation of

new peers. Further, when examined even by the parents of the children, it is hard for the parents to distinguish the difference between their children's on screen and off screen friends without explicitly knowing the context of the identity of the relationship partner. Sesame Street's support of the characteristics of parasocial relationships has enhanced the ability of children to blur the boundaries between real and pretend. Children are generalizing pretend behaviors seen on television to make sense of the world around them, they are engaging the scripts and conflict resolution tactics of their on-screen relationship partners in their imaginary play, and they are having deep and meaningful conversations with their parents and friends about their relationships in the context of a shared culture.

The social off-screen environment created by distracted viewing and co-viewing primes children to consider the on-screen world through a socialized lens while watching television. Further, the program's ability to increase relatability and reliability of their characters builds interest and trust between the child and the television show. The more socialized, interesting, and trustworthy the place between a child and the television becomes, the more likely they are to blur the division between off screen and on screen worlds and consider the show a source of peer support. This environment allows them to generalize lessons between worlds and perceive the characters on Sesame Street as peers in a manner that closely resembles the formation and utilization of off-screen peers proposed by Albert Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory.

Looking forward, the field would benefit from continued research into the power of this multidimensional relationship to support nonformal and informal learning. The worlds of children are increasingly including technology and it is crucial that we begin recognizing the

relationships children form with television as complex, dynamic, and active. These relationships have immense potential beyond simply occupying children. Acknowledging that these relationships may start in two dimensions but regularly and authentically expand into the child's three dimensional ecosystems will begin a conversation that recognizes the child as an active agent. Further, the stance will shift the motivations of the power holders in the child's life away from strictly limiting quantity and towards supporting the quality of children's dynamic relationships with television.

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