Sesame Street and Learning through Play

An Interview with Rosemarie T. Truglio

Rosemarie T. Truglio is the senior vice president of curriculum and content at Sesame Workshop, where she is responsible for the development of the interdisciplinary curriculum on which *Sesame Street* is based, and oversees content development across platforms such as television, publishing, toys, home video, and theme park activities. She also oversees the curriculum development for all new show production, including *Esme and Roy,* a series about learning through play, airing on HBO and PBS, and two shows on Apple TV's *Ghostwriter*, a reimagined version of a workshop series with a literature focus from the 1990s and *Helpsters*, whose characters love to solve problems using fundamental coding skills. Before joining Sesame Workshop in 1997, Truglio was an Assistant Professor of Communication and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. In addition to numerous articles in child and developmental psychology journals, she is the author of *Ready for School! A Parent's Guide to Playful Learning for Children Ages 2 to 5* (2019) and coeditor of *G is for Growing: Thirty Years of Research on Children and* Sesame Street (2001). She currently serves on the advisory boards of the *Child Trends News Service*; Read Alliance; The Ultimate Block Party; and The Toy Association Diversity and Inclusion Committee. She previously served on the National Advisory Child Health and Human Development Council (NICHD), the LEGO Foundation Research and Innovation Network, and the PBS KIDS Next Generation Media, among others. She received distinguished alumni awards from Douglass College (2005), University of Kansas (2013), Rutgers University (2014), and the University of Kansas Women's Hall of Fame (2015). **Key words**: preschool television programs; *Sesame Street*; Sesame Workshop; Whole Child curriculum

American Journal of Play: Dr. Truglio, how did you become interested in how children develop?

Rosemarie Truglio: My interest in children is definitely linked to my childhood

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experiences, in particular my play patterns and in my family and culture. I was the youngest of three children and the only girl, with brothers who were ten and seven years older. So, I engaged in a lot of solitary pretend play at home, which also included two imaginary friends! Children typically role play what they see, so my play during my preschool years was based on my experiences growing up in an Italian American home with a loving and nurturing mother.

I grew up in Hoboken, New Jersey, and my neighborhood was comprised of many families. It was a time where children played on the sidewalks and hung out on stoops while parents and storekeepers kept an eye on everyone. It was during this time that I cared for and babysat for my neighbors' young children. These formative years laid the foundation for wanting a career working with children. While I didn't know exactly what that would be, I was determined that I didn't want the role my mother had planned for me, which was to get married and raise my children on the same block. I knew that education was my doorway to a different kind of future.

The biggest obstacle was mentorship, because only one member of my extended family was a college graduate. This cousin was an elementary schoolteacher and, while teaching was an option, I was interested in other career paths. Fortunately, in one of the families I babysat for, the father was a school psychologist. I had no idea what he did, so I asked him lots of questions, and these conversations introduced me to the range of options within psychology. So, off I went to college with the plan to major in childhood psychology with a minor in early-childhood education.

AJP: What kind of support did you get for these choices and this educational focus?

Truglio: It was my father who supported my educational pursuits. As an Italian American male, support for his daughter going to college and graduate school to receive a doctorate in child psychology was atypical and countered both gender and cultural stereotypes. My mother, on the other hand, was your typical gender and culturally stereotyped mom who couldn't understand my educational pursuits or career choices. She was very supportive and loving but didn't have a frame of reference to understand me. All she could focus on is when I'd meet the right guy, get married and have a family and, of course, live nearby! But I had other plans and the first step was to go away to college and not entertain their plan to

live at home and commute to school. The compromise became that I had to stay in New Jersey. I applied to Douglass College, Rutgers University, and was accepted. For graduate school, I went on to University of Kansas, specifically to study with John Wright and Aletha Huston, codirectors of the Center for Research on the Influences of Television on Children (CRITC).

To give you context: I wanted an applied degree; I did not want to do basic research. I wanted to become a psychologist to help kids. Initially, I thought my route would be clinical. Then my advisor, Carolyn Rovee-Collier, at Douglass College said, "You really have the skills to be a very good researcher. I think a career as a developmental psychologist suits you better than a clinical one."

I didn't understand her advice. In fact, I was very upset, because I thought that she was talking about academic aptitude. I was concerned that she thought I couldn't get into a clinical program. But she said, "No, that's not it. I'm just afraid that you're going to get into a program and it's not suited to who you are as a person." She told me this because, if you're going to be a clinician, you have to be able to distance yourself from your work and clients. She said, "It's not the best alignment for you." As we discussed a range of doctoral programs to apply to, she strongly encouraged me to apply to the Human Development program at the University of Kansas because of their "junior colleague" research program. You have to apply to three professors you want to work with, and they decide whether or not they want *you*. So, to find the right match, you need to read everyone's research and rank who you want to work with, in order.

When I read about the research coming out of CRITC, I said to myself, developmental psychologists do that type of research? I had no idea that this was a career option or that this type of research even existed. At the time, CRITC did research on *Sesame Street*, and the differential effects of educational versus purely entertainment content, and I thought, "This is really interesting."

That is how it ties back into nurturing. My advisor told me, "This is a junior colleague program, where you're going to be working hand in hand with your advisors. If you go to these other universities, you are just a number. You're not going to have that mentorship; and you need mentorship because you have no mentors in your life." She said that because I didn't have a group of people in my life who had academic careers—so, who am I going to turn to if I need support? When I found out through

the interview process that the Kansas program seemed to be interested in *me*—and I realized that other colleges I was considering were just asking, "Well, have you made your decision yet?"—that's when I understood that I needed to be at the University of Kansas.

And the rest is history. That's how I got involved in television research.

AJP: When you were at Kansas, was *Sesame Street* a goal? How did you set your sights on that particular show?

Truglio: Well, think about the University of Kansas's influence on *Sesame Street*. One of the postdoctoral fellows at University of Kansas was Dr. Valeria Lovelace, former director of research at Sesame Workshop. I would see Valeria when she came to CRITC and learned about her work in guiding *Sesame Street* programming. So, when I became an assistant professor at Teachers College at Columbia University in New York—I was an assistant professor in the communications department for seven years—I worked with Valeria to place some of my students as interns at Sesame Workshop. I maintained that relationship but never dreamed that I'd be next in line to this legacy.

AJP: What did you know about *Sesame Street* at the time?

Truglio: I didn't watch it as a kid. I was out of the age range when the show debuted. But I valued it as a preschool educational show and was impressed by how the content was curriculum driven and guided by research. When I'd just started grad school, I was involved with data collection for their first longitudinal study that looked at types of television content—this was in the early 1980s. This study, known as the Recontact Study, showed the beneficial effects of viewing *Sesame Street* as a preschooler on a range of academic and social outcomes in high school. My master's thesis focused on this data set to assess the differential effects of television programming and the development of early reading skills. *Sesame Street* is the gold standard for using educational content that impacts the lives of children and puts them on a positive trajectory. To come here and play a role—that was an amazing opportunity for me.

AJP: You've been with *Sesame Street* for more than twenty years. What has kept you there for so long?

Truglio: Our mission to help children grow smarter, stronger, and kinder! And I'm always learning! *Sesame Street* is such a long-running television show because we are constantly changing to meet the needs of kids, especially in the competitive media landscape. We're always learning: What are the

current educational needs? What are the best practices? So, it doesn't get stale.

AJP: What are Sesame Workshop's goals?

Truglio: Well, I love how we reframed the workshop's mission: to help kids grow smarter, stronger, and kinder. But it's more than these three words alone. It's how we define these terms in relation to our comprehensive approach to school readiness.

AJP: How are they defined?

Truglio: "Smarter" is defined by the academic skills—the fundamental content knowledge—but it includes the important cognitive processing skills that underlie *how* children learn the content knowledge. Therefore, smarter is more than learning your ABCs and 123s. Academic skills are important, but the executive-functioning skills are critical! They help children learn the content and instill a positive approach to learning. "Stronger" is not just promoting physical health; it's also about building resiliency skills. "Kinder" is mindfulness and a host of prosocial behaviors like empathy, compassion, and respect.

AJP: Then how do you apply that curriculum to all the content you're creating for *Sesame Street*?

Truglio: You can't cover all the curriculum goals in one show. Currently, each episode is driven by a topic and, as we explore the topic, we cover a range of relevant curriculum goals. This approach provides a meaningful context for more engaged and deeper learning compared to a sequence of disjointed segments covering a range of goals across different topics. Each year, we also focus on a critical educational goal that we can address to help children be ready for school. Zeroing in and learning about the current research and best practices in education gives us the opportunity to stay relevant in meeting the needs of today's children. Our curriculum is a dynamic document, always evolving. It's never been static.

That kind of frequent change can be hard. I don't mean that it's hard coming up with new topics but that it takes a lot of commitment, which we have here, commitment and a dedication to changing the show. Most children's shows are a formula. It doesn't matter if you wrote for the first season or you wrote for the last season, it's the same thing. But you have to have an especially committed, dedicated, creative, collaborative team to always reinvent and revolve around a new curriculum focus.

What makes *Sesame Street* unique is we are research-driven and always

investigating how the show can meet the current educational needs of children, not only to prepare them for school but for the world in which they live. Also, the process we engage in to address these needs through age-appropriate content that is appealing, engaging, and educationally impactful. The first step in the process is the annual curriculum seminar.

AJP: Tell us about the seminar, and how do you use it to approach a season?

Truglio: First, we have to identify the critical need we want to focus on for the season. That is an on-going process as we are connected to academic communities. We attend meetings and conferences to stay informed about current research finding and societal trends such as childhood obesity and increasing levels of stress and anxiety in young children. As a team, we consider what new curriculum focus to spotlight each year. As an example, our "healthy habits for life" focus in past seasons came about when we learned of the increase in childhood obesity, how early these habits are established and how we could create content to address the development of these healthy habits during the preschool years.

Once we determine what we want to focus on, then we identify the experts who are doing that research with preschoolers. We bring in academics who are actually looking at these trends, because we need their research to help us figure out the key curriculum goals. What are the key messages and the best practices for executing these goals? What is the quintessential space for us to focus on in early-childhood education?

AJP: Does any other TV show you're aware of take the same approach?

Truglio: Some adapt our model, in terms of bringing in advisors and having formative research and, to some extent, impact research—although many others don't have the amount of impact research we do because we've been at it for so many years. But I don't know of another whole child curriculum-driven television series that constantly evolves. I don't think there is one.

AJP: How do you create an individual episode of the show?

Truglio: After the curriculum seminar, we revise the curriculum and issue a brief, summarizing the key educational messages of the curriculum focus. We then meet with the writers to address any questions they may have, and then the head writer meets with the writers to discuss their story ideas. But the creating of an episode changes all the time, because not only is the curriculum evolving, the format and the structure of the show is always evolving, too. It's being informed by research. Research first informs the curriculum focus and then our formative research on how to make the

show appealing and engaging and relevant in today's landscape.

AJP: What is the hardest thing about changing an iconic television show?

Truglio: It is, to some extent, letting go of our sense of nostalgia for a style that worked in the past. We're celebrating our fiftieth anniversary because we embrace change and we will continue to experiment to navigate the next fifty years! Nostalgia doesn't work for kids. That's why I always say: The current season is for today's children.

AJP: Can you provide an example of that change?

Truglio: Well, look at the criticism we received when we introduced the segment called "Elmo's World." There was a backlash to changing the familiar structure of the show. One of my comments in response to the criticism was, "I know why you're reacting to it. But could you just wait and see how your kids react to it?" And then all of a sudden, parents began to say that "Elmo's World" was the greatest thing on the show.

AJP: Is there one episode that you think of when somebody asks you, "What's your favorite?" Because, surely, people ask you that all the time.

Truglio: I have so many, because there's always going to be a special one for the given season, and we've covered so many topics. But the one that I'd have to say is really close to my heart is "Happy to Be Me." In this episode, Big Bird is being bullied and he's trying to change his physical features so he can fit in at a birds' club. We portray what Big Bird is feeling and how his friends want to help and support him, which, in the end, means standing up for a friend who's in trouble and going to an adult to get help. One of the key messages is that when a friend is in trouble go to a trusted adult to report it, which is very different from tattling (an action that *gets* a friend in trouble).

AJP: How did the episode develop?

Truglio: We first attempted to address bullying with an episode after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack. We were still in the studio at the time of the tragedy with four stories left to write. We asked ourselves, what can you do to help children in this changing world? We knew that children who looked Middle Eastern were being bullied in the aftermath of the attack and that bullying as a consequence of stereotyping and discrimination is something that *any* child might experience. We connected with mental health advisors to discuss how best to approach this topic for our preschool audience. In this story, Telly's cousin, Izzy, takes Telly's collection of triangles. Telly tries different strategies to get them back but is

unsuccessful, which leads him to get increasingly angry. Gordon, an adult human character, tries to help
Telly calm down, but Telly is frustrated and says "I just want to hit him." Trying to get Telly to think about the consequence of that behavior, Gordan asks Telly, "What would happen if you did hit Izzy?"

In a thought bubble, Telly describes how he and Izzy would get into a fight and both would get hurt, go to the hospital, and Izzy would still have the triangles! While the strategy was correct, the performance and the production features made this scene comical. So the results of formative testing with preschoolers showed that instead of discouraging kids from hitting, the comedy supported hitting as a possible conflict-resolution strategy. A lesson learned from research conducted by Dr. Jennifer Kotler Clarke, Sesame Workshop's vice president of research and evaluation, together with her team, was "use humor to reinforce the lesson you want to make salient." In other words, use humor precisely in support of the curriculum goal and lesson; otherwise kids will remember the message that was humorous and lead to an unintended lesson learned!

So, in our next attempt, a song called "Happy to Be Me!", we worked with a panel of child-development experts whose research focused on intervention strategies to help reduce bullying behaviors. This time the formative research showed we got it right!

AJP: And how does research specifically on play inform the show?

Truglio: *Sesame Street*'s educational philosophy has always been infused by playful learning. The research on play and how children learn through play informed how we can address this curriculum focus on *Sesame Street*. As a member of the LEGO Foundation's Innovation and Research Advisory Board, I learned a tremendous amount of information from my fellow advisors and looked for opportunities for us to create content emphasizing learning-through-play scenarios. So that's why I proposed using such scenarios for season 49 of *Sesame Street*.

But, before I had the opportunity on *Sesame Street*, I proposed a learning-through-play curriculum for a new animated series, *Esme and Roy*, currently airing on HBO and PBS Kids.

This series focuses on how children learn through three types of guided play (role play, maker play, and game play) and how play can be used as an effective learning tool to solve problems. On *Esme and Roy,* the main characters structure play around the interests of the little monsters they

are watching and that context helps their little monster charges learn—for instance, if the monster likes playing restaurant, we design the episode to use this specific type of play to enhance learning. *Esme and Roy* has had a focus on guided play and making a play plan since its beginning.

The following winter, *Sesame Street* adopted a different type of learning-through-play approach, one linked to career-based role play. We called it "Inspire to Aspire: If you see it, you can play it, you can be it." Season 49 portrayed a range of careers and jobs so that children learn all the things a person does in the job, to increase children's understanding for them to create their play and learn a range of school readiness skills while playing.

It gets back to what I was saying about my own career goals developing from my play. I played what I saw, right? I saw my mother, and she's a nurturer. I didn't go to preschool, so I didn't even play teacher. I didn't learn about the roles of a teacher until I went to kindergarten. So, if children are exposed to a range of career and job experiences, it is reflected in their play patterns, which can become more sophisticated with such portrayals.

AJP: Has play always had a place on the show?

Truglio: We never had an explicit play curriculum guiding show content before season 49. That's not to say that we didn't model playful learning or play behaviors that could spark kids to have a similar play pattern. But it was never a focus to be explicit and say, "let's play" or "let's plan the play and play the plan."

AJP: Can you point to a specific moment that made you realize this was something that the show needed to focus on?

Truglio: Again, it was my involvement with the LEGO Foundation, where I was in a room with colleagues who were charged with the challenge of "How do we change the mind-set so that we adults (parents, educators, policy makers, and other stakeholders) can learn and appreciate how and what children learn through play?" Play is an effective learning approach because when children play they are motivated, actively engaged because it's meaningful to them. Play is joyful, iterative (learning the importance of taking safe risks and learning through mistakes and not giving up in the face of failure) and socially interactive (cooperation, collaboration, compromise, perspective taking, and empathy).

So, for one of our curriculum advisory seminars, we brought in experts such as Deborah Leong, who coproduced the Tools of the Mind curriculum,

which is play based, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek as well as teachers to help advise us.

Ultimately, we chose to model play on real-world career behaviors to inspire play. One episode example is making a newspaper on *Sesame Street*. The characters take on the different roles (the journalist, the photographer) to model how someone tells the story and another makes pictures to help tell the story. By reenacting this, after learning how the newspaper gets made, kids develop a new play pattern.

So our approach was to either model the career play pattern or show the career as if on a virtual field trip so kids could copy the behaviors being modeled and turn these into their own play.

Sesame Street always modeled playful learning. That's our history. We've just never before decided to label the play and say "let's design the play, let's make a play plan." On *Sesame Street*, the first time we made that explicit was in season 49.

AJP: What are your thoughts about the worries parents and educators express concerning screen time for young kids versus time spent in real-world play? Are you tackling this at all?

Truglio: Sesame Workshop's mission is to create content that is curriculum driven and age appropriate, that is designed to have educational impact. We also support the American Academy of Pediatrics media guidelines that were revised in 2016. Its position is that, for children ages two to five, care givers should limit screen use to one hour per day of high-quality programs. Parents should view media with children to help them understand what they are seeing and apply it to the world around them.

Basically, it's the content that you are engaged with that really matters and that *what* preschoolers watch and *how* they watch are critical elements of the equation in regard to screen time. That idea is central to the origins of Sesame Workshop by cofounders Joan Ganz Cooney and Lloyd Morrisett, and to the design of *Sesame Street* as a show that encourages viewing by parents with their children.

Sesame Workshop is committed to creating educational content. But no one would want children to watch even *Sesame Street* hour after hour after hour. That's why we have always promoted moderation. We've also said that children learn best through parent-child interactions, which is a reason why we've always tried to encourage parents to watch the show with their children, so that parents can then extend the learning after the

show through conversation and other engagement with their children.

Recently, we partnered with Common Sense Media to promote the idea of the device-free dinner, to give one example of what we're doing outside the show. Family time is so important, and with our busy lives and schedules, we are spending less time connecting, playing, and making memories with our children. This media campaign emphasizes the importance of family meals during which we connect to each other and have meaningful conversations.

AJP: How are you encouraging parents and children watching together, through the parodies you do of popular music, movies, and television shows?

Truglio: Parodies invite the adult in the room to share the viewing experience with a child. *Sesame Street* is known for its parodies, but the parodies are not done at the expense of the child. There's always got to be a lesson for the child. We ask: What is the kids' entry point? What grabs and maintains their attention to the screen? Take "A Cookie Is a Sometimes Food," as an example. No child knows that it's based on a parody of a Gershwin song from *Porgy and Bess*. Kids just see that Cookie Monster knows that he can't eat the cookie right now, and they find it funny. That's an example of a parody that does its work.

AJP: How does *Sesame Street* apply its research to international productions?

Truglio: That's a really great question because some version of *Sesame Street* is seen in more than 150 countries and territories around the world. In some of these, where original production resources are more limited, the domestic show library gets dubbed into the local language with a limited amount of all-new, locally produced content, mostly animations and live-action films. In other regions, *Sesame Street* is an original show coproduced to reflect a specific country's culture and address its specific educational needs. So, instead of a city street, Sesame can be set in a piazza or a rural village, and the characters, both human and Muppets, reflect the country's population and cultural traditions.

In the past, *Sesame Street*'s international coproductions have always been separate from our domestic show. But now we're experiencing a call for more universality, and we're trying to create more content for global use because some of the viewing patterns that we see here in the United States are also apparent in other countries.

In many places, international viewers are getting many other American shows through streaming and satellite dishes, so trends there become

similar to those we see here. Our coproductions therefore air in a very competitive, cluttered entertainment world that is predominantly animated. Other countries are finding what we discovered here some time ago, which is that the original magazine format of the show does not work as well these days as in the past because it's now a narrative world out there. So, we're not interrupting the more narrative segments, what we call "street stories," as we did in the past.

The development of our coproductions is guided by the Sesame Workshop model, which involves both formative and impact evolution research and includes curriculum-driven content developed by a team of educators informed by education experts. Although there are some lessons to be learned from us here, they don't always apply to a particular country. But the model of research is the same everywhere.

What's also nice is that we have a global research department now. The research team oversees testing globally and this research is shared across all of our shows much more than in the past. There are no walls. There are no silos in research.

AJP: Both here and internationally, how has *Sesame Street* changed in its fifty years to meet kids' needs?

Truglio: The structure of the show has changed but what hasn't changed is that we are driven by a whole child, school readiness curriculum, which evolves to reflect the current needs and research-based best teaching practices. What hasn't changed is the model through which we create the content.

That gets back to education and research and production all working collaboratively. What doesn't change is our goal: Always identify the critical needs of children and how are we going to execute on those needs to provide content to make a difference in their lives.

The structure of the show has changed, however, and this change is necessary to keep the show relevant to today's children in a competitive landscape. There are people who may feel that the show that Jim Henson helped create is not the same one we produce now.

It's tragic that we lost Jim because I'm curious about how he would have embraced changes and what his vision would have been in today's media landscape. Jim helped create something that was so unique but still reflective of the shows in the late 1960s, primarily variety shows. That was an approach criticized by Fred Rogers who didn't agree that the mixing of reality and fantasy was appropriate for young children. That's why Mr.

Rogers had the trolley to take viewers to the world of make-believe. He kept the real world real. What Jim created was this hybrid, diverse, inclusive environment, a neighborhood that didn't exist. He had these characters, which are not reality characters, in this very real physical environment created by Jon Stone, the original show producer and head writer. It was a juxtaposition that shouldn't have made sense. But it did.

So, what would they have created today that doesn't exist? That's the thinking that informs our own changes on the show.

AJP: What is new and unique then about *Sesame Street* that makes it different from its past and from other shows?

Truglio: Oh, that's an easy one. What's unique about *Sesame Street* is that that it's not just a single-curriculum-focused TV show. We create content addressing all aspects of child development. Our curriculum is dynamic and re-examined each year to reflect the current needs of children as well as the best practices in education. We are a live action show with a loose show format, so we can produce shows addressing current issues that affect the lives of children.

In recent years, we've moved from an hour to a half-hour show to address the changing needs of our preschool audience. Now you have a half-hour of exploring and investigating a topic through different formats, different narratives. This topic-driven focus makes the show relevant and meaningful to children as they explore topics they are interested in and care about during which we teach a range of school readiness skills.

By doing so, you get deeper learning out of this topic because you're coming at it from different angles; you're coming at it from, "What else can I learn about this topic?" It's the Reggio Emilia philosophy of project-based learning. When kids enter a project, such as "I want to play dinosaurs," it's what they learn while they're playing. And that's how we get to that whole child curriculum.

Segments on the show are connected, they are always going to be tied to the theme. One example is an episode that centered on the theme of shoes. In a segment, Cookie Monster, in his Foodie Truck, is making muffins and we show how people wear special boots in the cranberry bog to harvest cranberries for the muffins. So, you're learning about a different kind of shoe in relation to a food item.

AJP: How do you assess learning gained from watching the show?

Truglio: Through summative impact evaluation research. We talked about the

kinds of research we do. Formative research is conducted to make sure we're getting it right while we are developing scripts before we go into production. Summative research is conducted to assess the educational impact on the viewers after it airs. In this particular case, we most often hire outside researchers to do an evaluation of what was learned. We look at the curriculum focus for that season and put the shows together that addressed this curriculum focus. Then sometimes we put these shows in schools where we can have a control group and an experimental group, and we measure learning before and after viewing. The point is to do it in a controlled way so we can be sure that kids do watch it—that's why we like to do those preevaluations and postevaluations in schools. Sometimes we do it in homes, but it's harder to monitor the frequency with which kids watch; with schools, we have more control.

We do this level of testing because we want to ensure that the curriculum and content we've created to address the need is effective. If the need we've targeted is socioemotional, then we test to see if children have acquired strategies or learned new behaviors. If it's an educational need, we test to see whether knowledge or understanding has increased. For example, during the years our curriculum focused on science and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and STEAM (adding the arts), we tested to see if we were increasing children's science knowledge that would be academic learning.

For executive function and self-regulation, we tested our lessons in delayed gratification—a study led by Dr. Deborah Linebarger with the Iowa Children's Media Lab at the University of Iowa. She did a pretest asking kids, "What is your most favorite treat? Is it a pretzel? Is it a piece of chocolate? Is it a marshmallow?" Whatever it was, she then put it in front of the child, whom she told to wait until she returned. In essence, she replicated the classic marshmallow test but with the key difference that she used a food selection that she knew would attract the child—after all, some people don't care very much for marshmallows so the temptation isn't there—to ensure she'd know that the child genuinely needed to exercise self-control to stop from eating it. Not eating a favorite food, that's an example of self-regulation, which is a process skill, not an academic skill.

We've tested our healthy habits for life curriculum, to see if kids would be more open to trying new foods and healthy foods and discovered that Elmo could influence kids to want to eat broccoli.

Other research we do, which doesn't get published, are our season assessments that inform us about what has been effective in a particular season, to guide what changes we need to keep in mind when we produce subsequent shows. We're very forthcoming with our findings at academic conferences, though, which is important because we are an educational institution and we are creating the content and addressing a particular need. So, we want to share these stories with the academic community.

AJP: How would you describe *Sesame Street* to someone who has never seen it? If aliens were to visit and you needed to answer in a pithy way, "What is *Sesame Street*?"

Truglio: *Sesame Street* is real. It's heartfelt. It's simple. It's furry and funny. No seriously, this is tricky! But I'm going to take a crack at it: *Sesame Street* is a diverse and inclusive, loving, fun neighborhood where learning is occurring all the time. It's a place where everyone can be who they are. They're accepted for who they are. Children who are watching the show see themselves represented in this community, in this neighborhood, and they love to play and learn along with their friends.

AJP: Is *Sesame Street* just a television show?

Truglio: No. *Sesame Street* is so much more than a television show! When I say that, I think about how our characters are reaching children and families across media platforms. One platform, Sesame Street in Communities, highlights our social impact through the work of Dr. Jeanette Betancourt and her team at Sesame Workshop. It's amazing what's being done at the community level, how the workshop is tackling a range of tough and sensitive topics affecting the lives of children and families that we can't do on the television show because they would not be appropriate there. These resources give families tools for how to talk to your child about topics such as autism, food insecurity, military deployment, death, divorce, homelessness, foster care and, most recently, a parent's addiction. Our characters are delivering those really important messages.

Another platform is themed entertainment, at our parks and live events and shows because—talk about shared attention—parents are engaged with a child, having fun playing and interacting and supporting the learning goals of the activity or experience. Then there's what we do with our publishing partners: families cuddling up together with a book. How our plush and other toys are a part of children's play. How our digital games—

such as *Cookie's Challenge*—are designed to help with process goals, like self-regulation. Many of our digital experiences are linked to curriculum goals and academic skills, like the Sesame Street Numbers app, while others, like Monster Maker, are designed to foster imagination and creativity.

AJP: What does the future look like for *Sesame Street* or on *Sesame Street*?

Truglio: That's just what's *so* exciting: Who knows?