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Five on Friday

Musings on Mental Health

Can You Tell Me How to Get to Sesame Street?

This week, legendary puppeteer Carroll Spinney died at the age of 85. Spinney was the artist who brought Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch to life on Sesame Street for fifty years!



[Photo Credit](#)

Launched in 1969, Jim Henson's Sesame Street was "a street like no other." For generations, Sesame Street has provided education, addressed social inequalities, and

promoted health and well-being for the youngest members of society. Sesame Street's pioneering spirit is in its organizational DNA, and time and again, it has modeled how to bring a myriad of real-world issues into conversations for kids, including topics related to mental health and wellness.

1. Colorful and friendly puppets with a message. We all know and love Carroll Spinney's most famous Big Bird and Grouch. Along with Cookie Monster, Elmo, Grover and others, these Muppets have been part of growing up for [millions of kids around the world](#). And as much as it is fun-filled, Sesame Street is serious about addressing complex developmental issues and modeling for kids how to cope with difficult circumstances. Bert and Ernie have taught us time and again about caring friendships, and the centrality of relationships to our mental health and well-being. Big Bird and Elmo were unforgettable in the show that aired on Thanksgiving Day in 1983 when they talked about death after the [actor Will Lee](#), who was Sesame Street's grocer, died. Big Bird taught children that adults will trust you if you tell the truth by sharing his imaginary friend Snuffalufagus with adults, a decision made by the Sesame Street team after a [series of sexual abuse incidents in preschools](#).

2. Meet Kami, Sesame Street's HIV+ Muppet. In 2002, South Africa's version of Sesame Street *Takalani Sesami* introduced the franchise's [first HIV-positive character](#). Kami is a furry, golden 5-year old whose mother died of AIDS and who contracted HIV at birth through a tainted blood transfusion. Kami means acceptance in the South African language Setwana, and Kami's healthy appearance and energetic personality are meant to [challenge erroneous assumptions](#) about HIV-infected children. With Kami, Sesame Street has opened conversation about stigmatization of people living with HIV and sensitive issues including loss, illness, and bereavement. Kami has been involved in [international campaigns for wellness and HIV](#), including a feature with former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and US President Clinton.

3. Supporting children affected by parental addiction. Earlier this year, Sesame Workshop announced an initiative to support children and families affected by [parental addiction](#) by introducing [Karli](#), a 6 ½ year old Muppet whose mom is dealing with addiction. Karli is the face of Sesame Street's foster care initiative as well. Through it all, Karli shares with friends on Sesame Street and around the world what it is like to have a mom in recovery. In videos and other learning content, Elmo and other friends on Sesame Street learn what Karli is going through. The conversations are helpful to Karli and they teach children around the world that addiction is a sickness and that their parent's

addiction is not their fault. With almost [6 million children](#) under the age of eleven living in US households with a parent who has a substance abuse disorder, Sesame Street is, once again, making sure its programs touch on real issues with constructive modeling and messaging.

4. Reaching vulnerable communities around the globe. Sesame Street is celebrating its [50th season](#), and Sesame Workshop – the nonprofit organization behind the show — has grown to reach kids and families in more than 150 countries and 70 languages. With the largest number of dislocated children in the world since the end of WWII, Sesame Street has made a commitment to refugee children who find themselves far from home. Recognizing potential developmental risks and trauma for children in these circumstances, Sesame Street launched [two major initiatives](#). In partnership with [International Rescue Committee](#), Sesame Street is delivering early learning programs and nurturing care to children and caregivers affected by the Syrian conflict. Sesame Street is also bringing play-based learning to hundreds of thousands of children in Cox’s Bazar Refugee settlement in Bangladesh. Since many refugees have no access to TV or mobile phones, these initiatives also bring Sesame directly to children and families with a [new collaboration with LEGO Foundation](#).

5. Nice idea, but does it work? Sesame Street and child development: from boob tube to educational tool. Two early studies conducted by Educational Testing Service (ETS) in 1970 and 1971 concluded that Sesame Street had a [significant educational impact](#) on its viewers. They also showed Sesame Street was effective in reducing economic disparities. Children from low-income households who watched Sesame Street regularly performed better than children from higher-income households who spent less time viewing. One major takeaway is that children who discussed the show with their caregivers learned more than those who did not, pointing to the [opportunity for adults to increase the show’s impact](#). Ten years later, [University of Maryland and Wellesley College investigators](#) found that viewing prepared students, especially African Americans, boys, and children from disadvantaged areas, for performance at their grade level.

Fifty years ago, Sesame Street founders Joan Ganz Cooney and Lloyd Morrisett asked a simple question about the new technology of their time. Could television help prepare economically disadvantaged children for school? Since then, for millions of children around the world, even if they did not live on Sesame Street, they grew up on Sesame Street where they learned to be “smarter, stronger, and kinder.” Carroll Spinney has left behind a legacy that is anything but birdbrained. For his extraordinary contributions to promoting

healthy development for children everywhere, we remember him, salute him, and thank him and his friends on Sesame Street - a street like no other.