We view the world through a child’s eyes.
We know the early learning years are the most critical.
We don’t shy away from the tough stuff.
We believe in hugs.
We see challenges as opportunities.
We bask in sunny days.
We practice kindness.
We aim for giggles.
We tinker. We measure whether it works. We accept that it’s not always easy.
We are stronger together.
We open our doors to everyone.
We stand up for what is right.
We hope for a better world—for all children.
We will do pretty much whatever it takes.

WE are the Workshop.
In a moment of profound global upheaval, Sesame Workshop is doing everything we can to deliver on our mission of helping kids grow smarter, stronger, and kinder, as we have for over 50 years.

Today the COVID-19 pandemic is not only upending children’s lives and routines, but also creating the largest disruption of education in history. The economic fallout will deepen inequality, food insecurity, and other issues vulnerable families face, for years to come. Meanwhile, a rising movement for racial justice is confronting children and parents with issues they can’t—and shouldn’t—ignore.

In these consequential times, educational media has never been more important. And Sesame Workshop is uniquely equipped to respond. Indeed, Sesame was created for just such a crisis. Our research-driven programs continue to rise to complex, ever-changing challenges at home and abroad, using the power of media and technology to guide, comfort, and empower children and families with lasting impact.

In 2020, the Workshop addressed urgent new needs while delivering on our most ambitious plans.

• In response to COVID-19, we launched the Caring for Each Other initiative and produced numerous specials, resources, and targeted messages to support families in 102 countries.

• In the wake of nationwide protests about racial injustice, we partnered with CNN to air a town hall, Coming Together: Standing Up to Racism, and launched a special, The Power of We, on PBS Kids and HBO Max.

• New seasons of Sesame Street, Esme & Roy, and The Not-Too-Late Show with Elmo premiered on HBO Max.

• Season 49 of Sesame Street and Season 1 of Esme & Roy launched on PBS Kids.

• The inaugural seasons of Ghostwriter and Helpsters streamed on Apple TV+.

• Seasons 1 and 2 of Ahlan Simsim debuted across the Middle East and North Africa, reaching kids affected by conflict and displacement.

• Season 11 of Takalani Sesame launched in South Africa, Sisimpur aired its 12th season in Bangladesh, and the very first season of Sesame Sheeko Sheeko premiered across Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Kenya.

• The Workshop took home 11 Emmy Awards and received the prestigious Kennedy Center Honor recognizing our 50 years of contribution to American culture.

Consistent with longstanding plans, 2020 also marked the year that Jeff Dunn’s time as President and CEO of this remarkable institution came to a close. Effective January 1st, 2021, Steve became the sixth CEO of Sesame Workshop and Sherrie became the Workshop’s new president. We are both enormously grateful to Jeff for his leadership, thoughtful guidance, and mentorship throughout his tenure with Sesame Workshop. It is an honor to carry on this extraordinary work at home and around the world.

We are so proud of the accomplishments and progress we’ve made together this past year. And there is much more to be done. While we know the challenges ahead are immense, we see a brighter future for children everywhere. Our heartfelt thanks go out to the many partners, donors, and friends whose trust and investment continue to make this essential work possible. Regardless of what’s happening in the world and in children’s lives, Sesame will remain a trusted and reliable foundation for families. Now more than ever, the future needs us.

With gratitude,

Stephen M. Youngwood and Sherrie Westin
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We are the nonprofit educational organization helping kids grow smarter, stronger, and kinder.

1 Educational specialists, puppeteers, producers, writers, strategists, researchers, artists, technicians, designers, and other passionate experts, partners, and collaborators.

2 A nonprofit focused on one thing: helping children. Everything we do, from social impact programs to corporate partnerships, supports that.

3 Bringing early learning into everyday moments—on screens, in classrooms, in communities, everywhere little ones learn. Preferably while they’re having fun.

4 Reaching children in 150+ countries, with a focus on ages 0 to 6, a critical window when children develop skills and understanding that shape their lives and potential.

5 From ABCs and 123s to critical thinking and problem-solving, our curriculum reinforces the academic fundamentals all children need.

6 Helping kids develop the full spectrum of life skills to thrive and navigate their world as they grow up, like emotional resilience, healthy habits, and physical wellness.

7 Teaching and modeling empathy, mutual respect, and understanding. Because children have the greatest potential to make the world a better place for all.
Today the well-being of young children is more precarious than at any point in recent history. How we choose to respond will have ripple effects for generations.

While the scale of the upheaval is new, the solution is not. The Workshop has blazed the path for more than 50 years.

Educational media has the singular power to engage the whole child—and whole families—in ways that change mindsets, change behaviors, and change the future. Our proven formula for laughter and learning is a necessary force for good: nurturing resilient brains and bodies, connecting children to each other and their world, and continuing to rise to challenges we can’t imagine yet.

We don’t know the future, but we know our role. Whether the next crisis is sudden or systemic, local or global, the Workshop will be there to give young children the best possible start on life—whatever it brings.
LEARNING IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS
FOR FAMILIES, the COVID-19 pandemic is a perfect storm. Kids around the world have seen their lives and routines upended overnight while adults around them struggle with a rollercoaster of uncertainty. With the disruption affecting even the youngest, the impact on children’s wellbeing and development—and society as a whole—may not be recognized for decades.

Even before we knew the scale of the pandemic, the Workshop set out to do what we always do: come to the aid of children who need us. After all, Sesame Street friends like Big Bird and Elmo have long reassured children in difficult times. Our trusted brand of playful early learning is a lifeline for families, able to reach and engage children when the rest of the world goes remote.1

Within weeks of the first U.S. cases, we launched Caring for Each Other, a global initiative to keep families safe and connected in a new reality. Our short-form videos, PSAs, and global TV specials1 brought kid-friendly health messages, helping adjust to new routines, and words of comfort to children in 102 countries4 and 41 languages. Muppets and other experts took on kids’ biggest questions at three televised town halls.5 With most activities off limits for families, our wellspring of online resources6 helped fill the gap.

We are committed to going where the needs are greatest, from delivering targeted support to families with special challenges7 to finding digital workarounds when essential in-person services are interrupted.8 Thanks to heroic support from funders8 and partners, these efforts continue to evolve with the growing need.

And as children and families face new waves of hardship from this crisis,9 Sesame will be there at every step. It’s what we’ve done for over 50 years: help families learn, laugh, play, and grow through stormy times—and guide them through to sunnier days ahead.
When the first coronavirus cases hit the U.S. last March, Ben Lehmann, executive producer of Sesame Street, braced for disruption.

New York City was shutting down. With the Workshop’s production team unable to enter the studio, he recalls, “we had to learn how to communicate all over again.” Production meetings with 100+ people were held via Zoom. Puppeteers prepared to work in quiet corners of their homes with Muppets hoisted on arms and mics tethered to foreheads.

Lehmann remembers the flurry of decisions. “We’ve shipped the puppets to the talent. Now how are they capturing stuff? What phones do they have? Does he have a green screen? What’s the right setting to capture audio?”

Meanwhile, millions of kids were waking up to a total loss of routines. The Workshop knew waiting it out wasn’t an option. “COVID disrupted everything,” says Rosemarie Truglio, the Workshop’s SVP of curriculum and content. “So we asked, ‘What do children need now and how can we deliver?’”

MAKING A DATE
Demand for children’s TV skyrocketed in early 2020.1 With enthusiastic support from our distribution partners around the world,2 we quickly deployed kid-friendly PSAs with short health and safety messages. Steve Youngwood, Sesame’s chief executive officer, then asked Lehmann if his team could handle something bigger.

Inspired by the then-novel concept of video hangouts, the idea for a “virtual playdate” took shape—a chance to reassure families that although they’re separated, they’re not alone.

“All of the sudden it was moving. People just start doing their thing,” says Lehmann. “Usually, we’d take up to three months to write a script for a special. But we knew the sooner we can do this, the more powerful it will be.”

Zoom’s constraints became opportunities. “The art of puppetry is setting eyelines to make interactions seem real,” says Lehmann. “But with Zoom, everyone’s looking at the screen.” With all eyes turned to the camera, “Zoom ends up being a great way to do a sing-along. It elevates that feeling of being in this together.”

1 Downloads of the PBS Kids video and game apps surged 80% in the first three weeks of April 2020.
2 Thanks to major distribution partners including WarnerMedia, PBS, BBC, TV Azteca, SABC, MBC3, NHK, ABC Australia, HBO Asia, Tiny Pop, Armed Forces Network, and many others.
Booking famous faces, like Tracee Ellis Ross and Lin-Manuel Miranda, was the easy part. “Celebrities asked us, ‘What can I do?’ but they didn’t always know the implications,” Lehmann recalls. “We’re going to need you to video yourself and send us the file.’ No matter how much you prepped people, it was new.”

**WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW**

In fact, the Workshop was well prepared for this moment. “In the new season of *Sesame Street,* we focus on the importance of perseverance and learning through set-backs and mistakes,” says Truglio. “Resilience is an integral life skill, necessary when life is throwing you curve balls. When COVID hit, we said, ‘How do we think creatively and get this content out?’”

Within weeks of entering lockdown, Sesame debuted *Elmo’s Playdate,* a primetime TV special created to offer families much-needed comfort and support. United virtually for games, songs, and laughter, *Sesame Street* friends show kids that, despite so many changes, fun can still happen.

Anne Hathaway leads Elmo in a spirited round of “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” (minus the face touching), kids take a virtual cookie-making class with you-know-who, and the special wraps up with a star-studded sing-along. Learning through play is baked into the fun, from sharing tips for healthy handwashing to recognizing the essential workers keeping the outside world going.

**SMALL SCREEN, BIG IMPACT**

Reaching over five million viewers worldwide, *Elmo’s Playdate* has become a model for the Workshop’s programs globally, including *Elmo’s World News* and *Ahlan Simsim: Friends Time.*

As tools like Zoom become a lifeline for families, *Elmo’s Playdate* models how screen time can be quality time. “We’re helping families make the most of what they have and engage in playful learning in everyday moments,” says Truglio.

By summer’s end, Lehmann’s team was back in the studio — but not back to “normal.” They’re still learning how to make TV with an ever-changing playbook. “I’ve had 15 COVID tests in the last month,” he says, undaunted. “This is just the way the Workshop always responds to urgent needs. When kids need us, we’re there.”

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[3] Season 51 premiered November 12th, with guest appearances from Kelsea Ballerini, Stephen and Ayesha Curry, and Issa Rae.

[4] The special premiered on April 14th on PBS Kids, HBO Max, and other WarnerMedia channels.

[5] Broadcast in 54 countries, this special models playful activities for kids and caregivers to do together at home.

[6] This Arabic-language special is designed to bring together children and caregivers across the Middle East.

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**WHEN KIDS NEED US, WE’RE THERE.**

ABOVE: Elmo and Anne Hathaway play “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” over Zoom. BOTTOM AND TOP RIGHT: Executive Producer Ben Lehmann and the cast and crew of *Sesame Street* return to the set after months of working remotely.

PHOTOS BY ZACH HYMAN
COVID-19 has made the world much smaller for families with young children. As they adapt to the “for-now normal” of shelter in place and physical distancing, parents find themselves without the connections and routines they depend on for their families’ wellbeing, comfort, and safety.

Yet for parents of children on the autism spectrum, the stakes are even higher. “For the autistic community, routines are an essential base that connects them with others,” says Jeanette Betancourt, SVP of U.S. social impact at Sesame Workshop.

The need to wear masks, learn online, and remain flexible in changing routines—burdens on any family—become significant challenges for kids who are neurodiverse. “These children may be limited in language, they may need to see therapists often,” says Betancourt. “How do you maintain that support now that everything’s changed?”

Families of children with special needs have long had a friend in Sesame Workshop. In 2015, we launched See Amazing in All Children to bring awareness and acceptance of children with autism. Our resources have reached millions of educators, service providers, and families, giving them language and tools to navigate everyday moments and challenges.

Those needs are not static, and neither is our approach. “COVID didn’t change what we do, this is what we do best,” says Sherrie Westin, the Workshop’s president. “We always work to address the most pressing issues facing children, to give families and caregivers the tools they need to help children cope with challenges. Responding to COVID-19 was no exception.”

1 New research suggests See Amazing is changing minds among parents of kids with and without autism.
Source: Disability Scoop
RESOURCES TO THE RESCUE

“Right away as a result of COVID, we saw increased stress and anxiety in vulnerable households,” says Betancourt. “Our partners and families were asking us how we can help bring comfort and ease.”

This summer, Sesame snapped into action with new coronavirus-related resources for families with autistic children. Our videos, storybooks, and daily routine cards help families deal with tricky issues, such as embracing new health and safety behaviors and adapting to on-screen therapies.

One video features Julia, a 4-year-old Muppet with autism. When she doesn’t want to wear her mask to visit the park, her dad helps her see that with practice, she can get used to it—just like her toy rabbit Fluffster. Another video models flexibility when things don’t go as planned. With the park too crowded for Julia and her family, they make an adventure out of the walk home: bird watching, hopping cracks, and refocusing on each other.

SURROUNDED BY SUPPORT

As these resources show, supporting children means speaking to the grown-ups in their lives. “Our programs help parents cope with their own difficulties, so they can keep themselves and those around them healthy,” says Betancourt. “When we create a circle of care and nourishing connections around young children, we are much more likely to mitigate the effects of trauma.”

That’s the driver behind Sesame Street in Communities: an initiative to support families in difficult situations by empowering community partners and delivering trauma-informed resources.

Take parental addiction, an issue that’s intensifying under COVID-19: When a family member struggles with addiction, the whole family struggles. Children may feel shame, embarrassment, guilt, and loneliness, and worry the illness is their fault.

For them and so many others, we created Little Children, Big Challenges: Building Resilient Kids, Families & Communities. This new special episode unites Muppets with real-life community partners to help kids talk through big feelings, vital when in-person services aren’t possible. Sesame Street’s Alan reaches out to Karli, a 6-year-old Muppet whose mom struggles with addiction. “My mom was doing a lot better, but now she seems really worried. I’m scared she’ll get sick again.” With advice from an adult expert and an 11-year-old who’s been there, Karli is comforted that, with time, things will get better.

HAND IN HAND WITH PARTNERS

Thanks to a generous grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, our work on issues like parental addiction keeps evolving. “Our RWJF grant is helping us reach children more directly than ever before,” says Betancourt. “We’re also changing the mindset of key community influencers. So when they think about parental addiction, children are part of that.”

“Our unique partnership with Sesame is about more than delivering wonderful educational content,” says Kathryn Wehr, senior program officer at RWJF. “By addressing conditions that make it hard for children to live their best lives, we’re helping families feel cared for and understand that, especially in this difficult moment, their community is there for them.”

The innovative approaches that are arising in response to COVID-19, says Betancourt, will help the Workshop build family and community resilience even beyond the pandemic. “When you’re forced to be creative, you end up with a model for the future.”

RIGHT AWAY AS A RESULT OF COVID, WE SAW INCREASED STRESS AND ANXIETY IN VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS.
COMING TOGETHER
INSIDE & OUT
N 2020, millions took to the streets to condemn racism. Whether witnessing protests on TV or in their own neighborhoods, kids paid attention. The demand that people be safe, seen, and respected, whatever their skin color, is ultimately about creating a better world for all children to grow up in.

That belief has guided us for over 50 years. On Sesame Street, built on inclusion and kindness, friends of all colors, furry and not, have always come together to celebrate differences and cherish what we share. Over the years, we’ve never shied away from tackling issues caused by the systemic disparities that have burdened generations of Americans. At this critical moment, we knew the Workshop had a role to play, and silence wasn’t an option.

We know that racism hurts everyone — and that families from all communities, BIPOC and non-BIPOC, want support to talk to their children about race and identity. With children starting to notice racial differences in infancy, it’s never too early.

Now we’re using our platform as never before to help families build understanding, skills, and courage to stand up for racial justice. In our broadcast TV specials, Sesame friends help families make sense of what’s happening in the country, give parents strategies to start conversations, and model behaviors that can create positive change.

And this Workshop-wide push keeps building steam. This summer, we convened experts in the areas of race, identity, and equity to guide all our work as an organization. Through our new Racial Justice Content Task Force, we are continually reviewing our language and assumptions. Working with partners, we’ll soon develop and release new resources to help families heal from historical trauma.

Speaking out against racism is about supporting the full humanity of children. When kids are proud of their identities and learn how to be “upstanders” for themselves and others, they grow into more confident, fair-minded, and empathetic adults. That’s an investment in a more equitable society for generations to come.

1 Black Lives Matter has been called the largest movement in U.S. history. As many as 26 million Americans participated in country-wide protests since May 2020. Source: The New York Times
2 Whoopi Goldberg famously shared with Elmo that she loves her “pretty brown skin,” just as Elmo loves his red fur, and even if they could trade, they wouldn’t want to.
3 From incarceration to health disparities, we take on issues that disproportionately affect families of color and reflect the troubling reality of institutional racism in the U.S.
4 When caring adults are silent about racism, children miss out on important lessons, like the need to reject negative stereotypes and to value their own identities and those of others.
5 Research tells us that children are not colorblind. Source: Erin N. Winkler, Ph.D.
6 Read about the creation of our latest TV special, The Power of We, on page 22.
7 Our guidance to parents includes not shutting down children if they mention race, and inviting kids to look for the good in others and see that good in themselves.
8 In our CNN town hall Coming Together: Standing Up to Racism, Abby Cadabby shares a story about how her friend Big Bird was a victim of prejudice, and how she stood up for him.
9 Learn all about it on page 24.
10 Our recent “Identity Matters” study explores how parents and educators think about children’s social identities and their critical role in children’s healthy development.
Summer of 2020 was a watershed moment in our country. The protests that erupted after the killing of George Floyd challenged many Americans to reckon with a painful past and present of racial inequity—ready or not.

“We see our nation opening up,” says Jeanette Betancourt, SVP of U.S. social impact. “We need to collectively engage with racial injustice. But if people don’t have the vocabulary yet, that can be difficult.”

Race and racism have long been taboo topics. “We learned from our identity study that white parents especially have a hard time talking about this. They think it’s not age-appropriate,” says Rosemarie Truglio, the Workshop’s SVP of curriculum and content. “Parents of color are more open, but also struggle with these conversations.”

A VOCABULARY GAP
That has consequences. When caring adults are silent about racism, they risk leaving children unable to reject negative stereotypes. Developing a positive sense of their own identity, and the identities of those around them, is essential for children to become confident and accepting adults.

How do you expand the comfort zone around a critical conversation? “The Workshop has always been about diversity and inclusion,” says Kay Wilson Stallings, executive vice president of creative and production. “Well, now it’s time to be explicit about what racism is.”

“When judgments are made based on one’s racial identity, people are hurt,” says Truglio. “If we are staying true to children’s needs, we knew we had to take this on.”

STANDING UP TO RACISM

LEADING A FAMILY-FIRST NATIONAL CONVERSATION
**COMING TOGETHER**

Sesame put that conviction into action with a televised town hall, *Coming Together: Standing Up to Racism*, which aired June 6th. Hosted by CNN’s Van Jones and Erica Hill with Sesame friends, this town hall special was the first media event to help families grapple with what was taking place in the country.

It was the beginning of a strategy we built on throughout the summer, including inviting experts2 to help us define the terms of the challenge. The questions were not easy, recalls Akimi Gibson, Workshop VP and education publisher.

“How do we meet people where they are on the journey, whether part of the affected community or those outside? How can we start hard conversations without people feeling rebuffed?”

“We knew Sesame had to come from a strength-based perspective: creating an opening that invites and includes everyone,” Gibson says. “It’s a big narrative challenge,” admits Executive Producer Ben Lehmann. “It’s hard to explain racism to a 3-year-old without showing a racist incident, which can aggravate the trauma.”

In *The Power of We*, Sesame friends model ways kids can stand up to racism, like creating signs and chalk murals.

**THE POWER OF WE**

Out of this intensive exploration came *The Power of We: A Sesame Street Special*.4 Debuting October 15th and starring Elmo, Abby Cadabby, Gabrielle, and her 8-year-old cousin Tamir, the special talks about unfair treatment based on skin (or fur) color in a way that’s new for children’s TV.5

In one scene, Gabrielle and Tamir are at a meeting with actor Chris Jackson and other Black friends: a chance to celebrate their identity and talk about their feelings. Catching up afterwards, Abby asks Tamir, “What kind of feelings?” “Feelings about racism,” he says. “You know, how people that look like me can get treated differently because of the color of our skin.”

Tamir shares an animation where a white boy tells a Black boy, “You can’t be a superhero. Superheroes are supposed to white.” Lehmann explains, “Showing what racism is in an animation was strategic, so we don’t show our characters getting hurt.”

When the boy’s friends stand up for him (“Superheroes can be ANY color”), Elmo and Abby are inspired to be “upstanders” to racism. “It’s one thing to be an upstander for yourself as part of an affected group,” says Wilson Stallings. “It’s another thing to be an upstander as an ally.”

The program’s rousing anthem, about treating all people fairly and kindly, crystallizes the lesson: “Stand up for what is right — listen, act, unite!” 6

The songs make the special work,” says Lehmann. “Music gives you the power to be positive and celebratory about a serious issue.”

**A JOURNEY OF HEALING**

*The Power of We* is a shining example of using our platform to change mindsets and behaviors. “We are teaching families that children are never too young to be ‘upstanders’ for themselves, one another, and their communities,” says Wilson Stallings.

“The community sing-along supports the empowerment of our youth and is part of the healing journey,” says Truglio. “It mirrors what we should be doing as a nation. Right now we all need some healing.”

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1 The scale of protests against racism and police violence was unprecedented, with marches in at least 1,700 cities and all 50 states. Source: USA Today

2 Learn more about our study conducted with NORC at the University of Chicago.

3 Key to our approach, advisories convene teams of cross-disciplinary experts to help make our work as effective as possible.

4 *The Power of We* was broadcast on PBS stations and streams on HBO Max and PBS Kids apps.

5 See our “Watch & Play” guide for the special.

6 Sing along with Chris Jackson, Andra Day, and the Sesame Street community.
Diversity and inclusion are in Sesame Street’s DNA. We debuted 50 years ago with the first-ever integrated cast in children’s television. We’ve always been a place that welcomes and celebrates all children, regardless of their race, gender, class, or country of origin.

How we honor those founding principles keeps evolving with children’s needs. “Because of what’s surfacing in our Black and Brown communities, in 2020 and going back historically,” says Jeanette Betancourt, the Workshop’s SVP of U.S. social impact, “we recognize our responsibility to go much deeper on issues of racial justice.”

“We are living through a second civil rights movement,” says Akimi Gibson, VP and education publisher at the Workshop. “Systemic racism remains one of the biggest things we need to dismantle to truly equalize things.”

To honestly confront systemic racism, there are no shortcuts. So the Workshop team is bringing our whole selves—empathetic hearts and open minds—to transform how we address race, identity, and equity in the lives of young children from the inside out.

Out New Racial Justice Task Forces

Our Internal Task Force aims to build a more supportive and inclusive Workshop for our employees of color, uniting people across racial identities, ages, and teams to help us address our own gaps as an organization. Working in tandem, the Content Task Force aligns our capabilities to help dismantle racism and build a more equitable world outside our walls.

1 Early on, the Mississippi State Commission for Educational Television voted to ban Sesame Street due to its diverse cast, a decision that was overturned after 22 days.

2 Both task forces bring together people of different ages, backgrounds, and racial identities from across the Workshop to ensure a wide diversity of perspectives.
Following massive protests in all 50 states, we convened panels of equity and inclusion experts to ground our staff in the shifting landscape. Panelists shared what they’re responding to in their communities, what tools families need to grapple with these difficult issues, and how approaches should vary for different communities.

These insights, among many others, are coalescing into the Workshop’s first educational framework for racial justice. Betancourt explains, “We need a shared foundation to guide curriculum and communication across the organization, from formal learning to production to social impact.” Already in the works: common language to address the varying needs of BIPOC and non-BIPOC communities, parents as well as their children.

**REVIEW AND REPRESENT**

Kay Wilson Stallings, EVP of creative and production and a leader of the Racial Justice Content Task Force, describes the work underway. “One of our roles is providing feedback on anything we make globally with an element of racial justice.” That could be a costume, a storyline that touches on racism, or the design of licensed products. “Are there issues of cultural appropriation? Is there an interaction that doesn’t feel right? Now we have a gatekeeper for those issues.”

Affirmative representation is at the heart. “There’s a part of Sesame Street that’s always been gritty and reflective of society,” says Gibson. “One thing we’re exploring is how to make Sesame Street look more like the world.”

While much of the cultural discourse on racism can feel confrontational, Gibson says, “we are leading with a strength-based, positive approach.” “As Sesame, we’re here to help families move toward hope and healing,” continues Betancourt. “That’s a new contribution.”

**LOOKING FORWARD**

The Racial Justice Content Task Force is ultimately focused on the future. “We’re imagining what racial justice looks like across our platform in three years,” says Wilson Stallings, be it part of Sesame Street, brand new content, or community outreach. “How can it touch everything within the organization?”

Research, too, must advance. “Today there’s not much guidance,” says Betancourt. “We want to challenge our conceptions of how race and identity affect children. This may be a window of opportunity, but we need to know what’s missing.”

This dynamic work in progress, Gibson explains, comes back to what children need most. “We are getting down to Sesame’s essence: being as relational as we can to support the full humanity of the child, how they see themselves and engage with the world that awaits them.”

No one on the task force takes the responsibility lightly. “It’s an honor to help the whole world that awaits them.”

Some of the equity and inclusion experts informing our approach through the Workshop’s racial justice advisories:

- **RENEE BOYNTON-JARETT** M.D., Sc.D.
  Associate Professor of Pediatrics, Boston Medical Center and Boston University School of Medicine
  Founding Director, Vital Village
- **DAMON CARSON** J.D.
  Executive Vice President and General Manager of Education, Instruction, and Operations, Neighborhood House Association
- **CHRIS CRASS**
  Educator, Speaker, and Author, Towards the “Other America”: Anti-Racist Resources for White People Taking Action for Black Lives Matter
- **BEVERLY DANIEL TATUM** Ph.D.
  President Emerita, Spelman College
  Speaker and Author, Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race
- **JENNIFER HARVEY** Ph.D.
  President, National Black Child Development Institute
- **MARGARI HILL**
  Co-Founder and Executive Director, MuslimARC
- **ANNA HINDLEY**
  Director of Early Childhood Education, National Museum of African American History and Culture
- **NONI THOMAS LÓPEZ** Ed.D.
  Head of School, Gordon School
- **DANIELLE K.C. ADAMSON**
  Senior Director of Programs, National Black Child Development Institute
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  Policy Director, First Five Years Fund
- **LINA GUZMAN** Ph.D.
  President of Strategic Initiatives and Strategy Director of Child Trends, Hispanic Institute
- **SARAH KASTELIC (ALUTIIQ)** Ph.D., M.S.W.
  Executive Director, National Indian Child Welfare Association
- **KATHLEEN KING**
  Interim Policy Director, Children’s Defense Fund
- **HILARY O. SHELTON**
  Senior Vice President, Policy and Advocacy
  Director to NAACP Washington Bureau
- **HOWARD C. STEVENSON** Ph.D.
  Constance Clayton Professor of Urban Education, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania

---

3 The first advisory, held in June, was a candid question and answer session with experts about how to best support families at this moment. A second, in July, focused on the historical and institutional structures that continue to afflict BIPOC communities.

4 A new racial literacy curriculum for families and community partners will launch in 2021, part of our *Sesame Street in Communities* social impact work.

5 Language includes being an “upstander” for ourselves, each other, and our community. Our approach addresses the need for both affected and unaffected communities to confront racism, but in different ways.

6 For example, in a script in development for our *Ghostwriter* series, task force members analyzed a storyline with a racist incident to ensure it was handled sensitively.
A puppeteer with Jad of Alhlan Simsim, Nowar Mahayri, after filming a scene in Jordan. When multiple emergencies in 2020 halted our work, we quickly adapted to reach children in new ways.

PHOTO BY MUHAMMAD HAMED/REUTERS
Now in its tenth year, the Syrian conflict has displaced over 11 million people, half of them children. They’ve lost homes and loved ones, and endured trauma that even adults struggle to process.

For these children and others in the region, a ray of hope, playful learning, and fun emerged in February 2020 when our Arabic-language TV show, Ahlan Simsim,\(^1\) began broadcasting in 20 countries. With new local Muppets,\(^2\) music, and storylines that build social-emotional and cognitive skills, the show’s first season has proven very popular with families across the Middle East and North Africa.\(^3\)

Key to the broader Ahlan Simsim initiative are innovative learning services delivered by our partner, the International Rescue Committee (IRC).\(^4\) In IRC centers and during home visits, trained personnel and volunteers from the community support children and caregivers directly, complementing the show’s lessons and helping parents nurture their children’s growth.

**REACH, LEAPING OVER OBSTACLES TO EARLY LEARNING**

**ADAPT,**

Laila Hussein, an early childhood development technical lead for Ahlan Simsim, knew the disruption could be catastrophic. “In the small window for early learning, we can’t miss our chance to reach these kids,” she says. “If they move up to first grade without the skills they need, they won’t make it.”

Hussein and her colleagues began looking for solutions that could work under lockdown. “We asked ourselves, what resources do we have? Does our audience have internet access? What platforms do they use?”

**COMPOUNDED EMERGENCIES**

In late 2019 and early 2020, political strife in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq abruptly worsened, followed by a global pandemic that shut down life across the region. “It affected all dimensions of our work,” says Workshop VP of Humanitarian Programs René Celaya. “Families and staff could no longer go to our learning centers, and our production team couldn’t get to the studio to continue filming the show.”

**REPEAT**

1 Ahlan Simsim means “Welcome Sesame” in Arabic.

2 Learn more about the show and see its characters featured on 60 Minutes.

3 In its first six months on the air on MBC3 and on YouTube, Ahlan Simsim reached over three million children in the Levant (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria) and millions more across 20 countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

4 Read more about this innovative global partnership, supported by a $100 million grant from the MacArthur Foundation.
DIRECT TO DIGITAL

Adapting to evolving context was built into the plan. “The humanitarian reality changes week to week, so we have to reevaluate and adapt. It’s in the program’s DNA,” says Celaya.

The IRC was already using WhatsApp to invite families into learning centers. Why not make their phones the meeting place? In no time, the team began sharing parenting tips, health messages, segments from the show, and playful skill-building activities with families via mobile. “In these interactions, we role-play with caregivers, modeling all they can do with their children at home,” says Hussein.5

Initial feedback suggests families embraced our messages, with their lovable Ahlan Simsim characters and engaging advice. “Our research partner, NYU’s Global TIES for Children, will assess not only which messages and formats families prefer, but also what they’re learning,” says Celaya. “Those insights will inform our future work.”

The potential goes far beyond emergency response, says Su’ad Jarbawi, the regional vice president of the Middle East for IRC. “When we deliver high-quality learning experiences digitally, we can support families in situations and countries we couldn’t reach before. The scale of impact is enormous.”

NEW LIFELINES

A similar evolution is underway in Bangladesh, where the Workshop is collaborating with BRAC and the IRC to reach hundreds of thousands of Rohingya children in the massive refugee settlement at Cox’s Bazar as part of the Play to Learn project.6

“Mobile service and internet are expensive and unreliable in the camps,” says Workshop VP of Humanitarian Programs Lesley Bourns. “In normal times, BRAC uses projectors in group settings where we work to share our learning content with families.” When COVID-19 hit, “that wasn’t viable.”

Our innovative response: a phone-based model with messages and lessons drawn from Play to Learn’s curricular approach. On 20-minute calls with parents and children, BRAC facilitators share information on mental and physical health, and activities that help children learn through play, says BRAC Executive Director Erum Mariam.

The effort has been wildly effective, reaching 80% of families living in camps and 90% in host communities. While COVID-19 has severely isolated families, says Mariam, “the calls remind them they’re part of a community.”

During COVID-19, we are committed to continuing to engage children in their homes, sharing playful audio messages over local radio stations and distributing colorful posters on healthy habits throughout the camps.

ADVOCACY IN ACTION

The pandemic is also advancing a far-reaching goal at the Workshop: amplifying the power of early childhood development to uplift children in any circumstances. “COVID brought the issue to everyone’s doorstep,” says Bourns. Cut off from everything outside the home, the playful lessons of Ahlan Simsim were a joyful outlet for families. And government ministries, NGOs, and donors in the region saw the potential.

“With our existing show, books, and other educational material, we can quickly support children with dynamic and engaging learning moments,” says Celaya.

Now conversations are underway with education and health ministries in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq eager to keep children learning when schools and childcare centers are closed. “Their priority is supporting as many families as they can,” says Celaya, “and we can say, ‘Here’s what we can do to make that happen.’”

In addition to governments, these projects also aim to ensure that early childhood services stand out as a priority for donors and humanitarian actors as they respond to a range of urgent needs. “We want them to see that early childhood education is a smart investment that can transform the lives of all children,” says Bourns. “And even in a pandemic, it works.”

5 Go deeper into how the Workshop and IRC are reaching children during COVID-19.

6 Take a photographic tour of BRAC’s colorful play labs in Bangladesh, funded by a $300 million grant from the LEGO Foundation.
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The Ford Foundation  
The JK Group, Inc.  
The Meredith Corporation Foundation  
UnitedHealth Group  
Walmart Foundation  
Warner Bros. Television Group
2020
FINANCIALS & LEADERSHIP
SESAME WORKSHOP remained financially strong in FY 2020 with positive growth in revenues, programmatic activities, and net assets compared to the prior year.

Revenue from these sources, excluding those with donor restrictions, increased 13% in FY 2020, to $61.8M. This increase largely reflects the continued expansion of our humanitarian work in support of children affected by the Syrian and Rohingya refugee crises. Revenues with donor restrictions, which will fund future programmatic activities, added an additional $27.5M in revenue, resulting in total revenues directly in support of programs of $89.3M.

In addition, revenues generated from the distribution of our media content and the licensing of our characters and brands increased by 54%, to $158.4M, as we continued to expand our slate of educational programs both in the U.S. and around the world, including two new series that launched on the Apple TV+ service in FY 2020. The income generated from these sources goes directly into the creation of educational content as well as substantially covering our fundraising and administrative costs.

Sesame Workshop continues to benefit from highly diversified sources of funding, including the generous support of individuals, private foundations, government agencies, and corporate underwriters.

Revenues with donor restrictions, which will fund future programmatic activities, added an additional $27.5M in revenue, resulting in total revenues directly in support of programs of $89.3M.

Total operating expenses were $211.4M in FY 2020, an increase of 41% over FY 2019. The share of operating expenses spent on programmatic activities increased to 87% from 82% in FY 2019. Overall, net assets without donor restrictions increased by $18.7M with an increase of $27.5M in assets with donor restrictions.

Sesame Workshop maintains a strong balance sheet which provides flexibility to invest in mission-critical initiatives and to provide long-term reserves to ensure the sustainability of the organization in times of economic uncertainty. At June 30, 2020 Sesame Workshop had operating cash and long-term investments totaling $313.7M and total net assets of $361.1M, including $66.0M with donor restrictions.

Sesame Workshop relies on the support of individuals, foundations, governments, and corporations to fund programmatic activities and initiatives that target the most vulnerable children, including our Sesame Street in Communities initiatives in the U.S. around racial justice and autism acceptance, our programs in India, Africa, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, as well as our work reaching displaced children in the Middle East and Bangladesh. Because of our unique business model, with significant revenues from distribution and licensing, we are able to invest our grant and contribution revenues directly into expanding these initiatives.
## STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FY 2020</th>
<th>FY 2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Without Donor Restrictions</td>
<td>With Donor Restrictions</td>
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<td>Net Assets Released from Restrictions</td>
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<td><strong>EXPENSES</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Program Expenses</td>
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<td>Media and Education</td>
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<td>113,913 -</td>
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<td>Global Social Impact</td>
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<td>Creative</td>
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<td>Provision for Income Taxes</td>
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<td><strong>INCREASE IN NET ASSETS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>NET ASSETS, END OF YEAR</strong></td>
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<td>$ 65,967</td>
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*In thousands

## STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION*

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<thead>
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<td><strong>ASSETS</strong></td>
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<td><strong>LIABILITIES &amp; NET ASSETS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Liabilities</td>
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<td>General and Administrative</td>
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<td><strong>Total Net Assets</strong></td>
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<td>314,885</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL LIABILITIES &amp; NET ASSETS</strong></td>
<td>$ 456,882</td>
<td>$ 414,921</td>
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## OPERATING REVENUE

- 1% Individual
- 2% Government
- 6% Corporate
- 15% Licensing
- 27% Foundation
- 49% Distribution
- 87% Program Expenses
- 11% General & Administrative
LEADERSHIP

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