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Broadcasting Change: *Sesame Street*, Child Development Theory, and the Politics of 1970s

America

Sesame Street emerged as a transformative program on children's television during the late 1960s when society faced social unrest and educational shifts. The educational children's program Sesame Street started its broadcast on November 10, 1969, to reduce learning disparities among preschool students through television's vast audience reach. Sesame Street introduced a revolutionary method that transformed children's TV by merging psychological discoveries with solutions to major social problems of its era. The program emerged during a critical period in 1970s America when institutional distrust intersected with calls for racial justice and education reform to become a science-based media initiative that served academic and social objectives. The show applied principles of developmental psychology and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to deliver television content to children living in various environments. By blending the developmental theories of Vygotsky, Piaget, Bandura, and Erikson with the sociopolitical goals of the Great Society, Sesame Street emerged as a groundbreaking educational project that responded to growing cultural fragmentation—marked by institutional distrust, racial inequality, and debates over parental versus state authority—while reshaping early childhood education and promoting national cohesion.

The breakthrough period for this innovation coincided with national debates about education reform and opportunity expansion following the civil rights movement. As highlighted

in Week 6: The Sesame Street program tackled systemic educational and housing inequities which public discourse focused on through its diverse cast and urban setting.

The application of Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory combined with the ideas of Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, Albert Bandura, Erik Erikson, and neuroplasticity research reveals *Sesame Street's* dual role as both an era product and influential force. Rather than treating these theories individually, this paper explores how their growing cultural influence in the 1970s allowed child development science to shape public policy and early education. According to Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, multiple environmental systems affect child development from direct surroundings such as family and school to larger social and cultural contexts. The framework allows us to analyze *Sesame Street* and its complex effects on children's development.

As part of the microsystem level experiences children encounter daily, *Sesame Street* offered educational material at home that enhanced regular family and school learning interactions. The program delivered critical literacy and numeracy instruction, which proved vital for children who didn't have access to quality preschool education programs. The mesosystem utilized *Sesame Street* as a connection point between domestic settings and educational institutions. By integrating *Sesame Street* content into regular activities and educational plans parents and teachers helped students learn consistently across different environments while creating a unified educational journey.

The show's development highlights exosystem influence because of financial backing from government and philanthropic sources demonstrating widespread social commitment to early childhood education (Week 10: Reshaping the State). Sesame Street's programming at the macrosystem level demonstrated diversity and inclusion which matched the social movements of

the 1970s aiming for social equity and representation during a time of major cultural changes (Week 6: Race and Place). During the chronosystem's evolution of societal norms and educational paradigms Sesame Street revised its programming to reflect and guide discussions about child development and media's impact.

The creators of *Sesame Street* skillfully integrated well-established developmental psychology concepts into their programming to produce educational content that also engages viewers. According to Lesser (1974), who evaluated the show's early development, the producers relied heavily on audience testing, child psychology consultants, and empirical feedback loops to ensure educational effectiveness. Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory proved the essential function of social interaction in cognitive development which he illustrated with the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). *Sesame Street* employed scaffolding techniques to deliver content that children could understand with only minimal support so they could learn within their Zone of Proximal Development.

Jean Piaget developed a theory of cognitive development which includes a preoperational stage for ages 2–7 where children demonstrate symbolic play and egocentric behavior. Through colorful characters and imaginative scenarios *Sesame Street* supported children's symbolic thinking which enhanced their engagement and understanding.

Albert Bandura developed the theory that children acquire behaviors by observing and copying others. *Sesame Street* presented characters who demonstrated positive social behaviors which motivated viewers to replicate those constructive actions and interactions.

Erik Erikson developed psychosocial development stages that emphasized trust building, autonomy development, and initiative taking during early life stages. The program's themes

matched early psychosocial development stages to strengthen children's emotional and social growth.

The discovery of early childhood brain plasticity through 1970s research highlighted the essential role stimulating experiences play in cognitive development. *Sesame Street* used this knowledge to deliver a range of rich content that helped build neural pathways to advance learning. More recent neuroscientific evidence supports this approach—Cantlon and Li (2013) found that neural activity while children watched *Sesame Street* predicted their standardized test outcomes, reinforcing the program's cognitive impact. Research has demonstrated that children exhibit neural responses during the program which align with cognitive abilities that validate the show's developmental impact.

The educational mission of *Sesame Street* stemmed from its initiative to address various societal challenges during the 1970s. The program built its reputation as a dependable source of information while the public's trust in institutions declined by challenging doubts about media and educational organizations (Week 4: Authority and Distrust). The President's Commission on Campus Unrest and Kevin Phillips' *The Emerging Republican Majority* both reflect the broader erosion of institutional legitimacy in the 1970s—yet, paradoxically, *Sesame Street* positioned itself as a trusted educational resource. Its creators saw media not as part of the problem but as part of the solution, offering stability and structure for children in a moment of cultural uncertainty.

During debates about race and education, exemplified by *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971), *Sesame Street* sought to offer fair learning chances specifically to disadvantaged groups (Week 6: Race and Place). The program received support which matched government objectives to reduce social inequalities using public educational and

welfare policies (Week 10: Reshaping the State). During a time of cultural strain, conservative groups examined media messages, which led *Sesame Street* to confront and respond to their evaluations (Week 11: The Rise of the New Right). In speeches like Newt Gingrich's address to college Republicans in 1978, the show's progressive themes—racial integration, bilingual education, urban focus—were interpreted as symptoms of liberal overreach. *Sesame Street* thus became a flashpoint in the culture wars over who should shape children's values and how. Some conservative critics saw the developmental experts behind the show—such as Bronfenbrenner and others—not as neutral scientists but as social engineers, part of a broader liberal attempt to replace parental influence with professional authority.

Sesame Street demonstrates how educational media and psychological theory work together with societal involvement to create powerful educational tools. The show enriched children's educational experiences through thoughtful integration of developmental theories while addressing key social issues and expanded discussions about education equity and media influence. *Sesame Street*'s enduring success illustrates how science-based media, rooted in psychological research and cultural awareness, can powerfully address societal challenges while shaping the educational and moral foundations of a generation.

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