

New study finds "Sesame Street" improves school readiness

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New research, coauthored by University of Maryland economist Melissa

Kearney and Wellesley College economist Phillip B. Levine, finds that greater access to Sesame Street in the show's early days led to improved early educational outcomes for children – and adds evidence to the argument that television can have a positive impact on society. While previous targeted studies conducted by the Educational Testing Services (ETS) in the early 1970s found that exposing children to Sesame Street increased preschoolers' test scores, the new study provides evidence that the generation of children who were of preschool age when the show aired did better in school once they got there.

Additional key findings

Boys and black, non-Hispanic [children](#) experienced the largest benefits. Effects are largest for children living in economically disadvantaged areas.

Kearney and Levine investigated whether groups of preschool children exposed to Sesame Street when it first aired in 1969 continued to experience improved outcomes. The results of their analysis indicate that the introduction of Sesame Street led to a positive impact on performance throughout elementary school. In particular, children with greater exposure to the show were more likely to be academically on track.

Kearney and Levine draw this conclusion after examining differences in access to Sesame Street that resulted from TV technology in the 1960s, when some stations broadcast on UHF channels and others on VHF channels. UHF broadcasts were weaker, which meant that children growing up in areas where Sesame Street was broadcast on UHF had limited access to the television show.

"Children who were [preschool age](#) in 1969 and who lived in areas with greater Sesame Street coverage were significantly more likely to be at the grade level appropriate for their age through school. The effect on

grade-for-age status is particularly pronounced among boys and black, non-Hispanic children," said the authors. "Living in a location with strong reception instead of weak reception reduced the likelihood of being left behind by 16 percent for boys and 13.7 percent for black, non-Hispanic children."

According to Levine, "It is remarkable that a single intervention consisting of watching a television show for an hour a day in preschool can have such a substantial effect helping kids advance through school." He also notes that millions of children watched a typical episode back then, making this a very cost effective approach. "Our analysis suggests that Sesame Street may be the biggest and most affordable early childhood intervention out there, at a cost of a just few dollars per child per year, with benefits that can last several years."

Kearney adds, "With so much emphasis on early childhood interventions these days, it is quite encouraging to find that something so readily accessible and inexpensive as Sesame Street has the potential to have such a positive impact on children's school performance, in particular for children from economically disadvantaged communities. These findings raise the exciting possibility that TV and electronic media more generally can be leveraged to address income and racial gaps in children's school readiness."

"Sesame Street was born in the late 1960s during a time when the importance of [early childhood](#) experiences began gaining more traction. Since our founding, Sesame Street has revolutionized early learning by using media to make educational opportunities accessible, helping children grow smarter, stronger and kinder. Drs. Kearney and Levine's research reaffirms the intention Joan Ganz Cooney and the team that created Sesame Street set out to accomplish. We are thrilled to see the positive effects of Sesame Street as a population-based intervention – especially for those less privileged," said Dr. Jennifer Kotler Clarke,

Vice President, Research and Evaluation, Sesame Workshop.

More information: "Early Childhood Education by MOOC: Lessons from Sesame Street." [DOI: 10.3386/w21229](https://doi.org/10.3386/w21229)

Provided by University of Maryland

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