"Me Want Cookie, Me Can Wait"

Sesame's Street's Vision for Helping Children Improve Self-Control and Other Executive Functions

by Mark Katz, PhD

COOKIE MONSTER HAS DECIDED to change some of his behavioral ways. Don't worry. He's still the same spirited soul we've all grown to know and love. He's just learning some new skills and strategies, like how to control himself and wait, how to calm down, how to pay attention, and how to listen to what others are saying. And he's teaching preschoolers to do the same, particularly before they start kindergarten, when these skills and strategies will prove extremely important to their success in school and in life.

Cookie Crumby Pictures presents

In the fall of 2013, *Sesame Street* launched Cookie's Crumby Pictures, a series of five-minute segments focusing on skills and strategies associated with self-regulation and self-control. Cookie Monster parodies different movie roles in each segment, all requiring that he master one or more of these and other executive functions.





Examples include:

- **The Spy Who Loved Cookies.** Cookie Monster sets out to save the cookie crown. Success will require that he learn to listen carefully to directions. Cookie Monster learns to listen and the crown is saved.
- **Life of Whoopie Pie.** Cookie Monster learns how to control himself and not eat a boat made entirely from cookies.
- **When Cookie Met Sally.** Cookie Monster learns strategies for waiting patiently for his turn in line.
- **Cookies of the Caribbean.** Cookie Monster is able to reach Davy Jones' cookie jar by learning how to remain focused and not give up.

Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit educational organization behind *Sesame Street*, has also created new interactive games to help children practice some of these strategies and build executive function skills:

- **Cookie Kart Racing.** Players use their working memory, think flexibly, and follow multiple directions to help Cookie Monster build his kart and drive along different learning-themed roads (letters, numbers, and shapes).
- **Cookies of the Caribbean.** Players help Cookie Monster run and jump to collect gems and play mini games that revolve around working memory, following directions, sorting by different attributes, and flexible thinking.

Cookie Monster's strategies are drawn from a self-regulation curriculum designed by Sesame Workshop's Curriculum and Content Department, in association with leading experts in the field. The curriculum integrates three self-regulation components—affective, behavior, and cognitive—or the ABCs of self-regulation.

The affective component helps children recognize, understand and respond to their emotions appropriately. The behavior component teaches children how to be more reflective, more empathic and less impulsive. The cognitive component teaches children how to connect past and future experiences (working memory), and how to make a new plan if the current plan isn't working (planning, flexible problem solving, attention shifting, task persistence, performance monitoring). Lessons incorporate other executive function skills as well.

By watching Cookie Monster learn ways to regulate his emotions, control his behavior, and think ahead about the consequences of his actions, preschoolers can learn these strategies, too. For decades, Sesame Workshop has been creating programs to enrich school readiness skills. Millions of preschoolers have benefited as a result. Few, programs, however, have focused this directly on improving self-regulation skills, behavioral self-control, and related executive functions.

Consider the potential implications. The Dunedin Study, a landmark outcome study currently being conducted in New Zealand, finds that children's self-control skills can predict a range of later life outcomes. So compelling were these findings that the study's principal investigator Terrie Moffitt, PhD, recommends that entire societies seriously consider universal interventions to improve children's self-control skills, much as entire societies did years ago to end illiteracy.

Research shows that preschoolers who lack self-control skills will start kindergarten at a serious disadvantage.* Visionaries at Sesame Workshop are hoping to remedy this. If successful, the benefits derived by preschoolers may extend well beyond kindergarten. For some, they may last a lifetime. Readers interested in learning more about this important work are encouraged to visit sesameworkshop.org, the Sesame Workshop website.

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* Blair, C. & Razza, R.P. (2007). Relating effortful control, executive function, and false belief understanding to emerging math and literacy ability in kindergarten. *Child Development*, March/April, 78, (2): 647-663.